

The Birds of Rivers Murray and Darling and district of Wentworth.

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PART I.

One of us (A. C.) has been resident in Wentworth for some years, while the other (A. M. M.) has made two trips on the Murray, and we have together examined the country between the S.A. border and the River Darling; from Belmore (about 40 miles north of the Murray) to Kudgee Lake and Cuthero Station, 100 miles by road up the Darling; as well as the country near the S.A. border on the Victorian side; for about 20 miles south of the River Murray. One of us has also, in company with Capt. S. A. White, examined the river bank and adjacent scrub from Rufus Creek to Renmark. Roughly speaking, four classes of country are met with—1. The river country, with its billabongs, swamps and lagoons, fringed with giant gums; 2. The box flats, bordering the outer edges of the gum country; 3. The sandhill country, timbered with mallee, sandal wood, black oak, many other shrubs and bushes, and occasional patches of pines; 4. Saltbush flats, lying between the sandhills.

Each class of country has its own avifauna, overlapping to a certain extent; but still fairly constant. The outlying lakes such as Yartla (fed from the Darling) and Kudgee (fed by Pine Creek from the Broken Hill district) resemble the river country in their vegetation and fauna.

Birds observed:—

Dromiceius novaehollandiae (Emu). Still plentiful away from the beaten tracks, and breed freely in good seasons. Laying begins in May, and hatched clutches up to nine in number have been seen. Foxes are very destructive to the young, but are unable to break the eggs; however, they roll them away from the nests, where they may be found with teeth marks on

them. In dry seasons, such as the present, they are seen along the river frontage. A favourite food is the native peach or quong dong.

Leipoa ocellata (Mallee Hen)—Found in the Victorian mallee, south of Mildura in parts not yet subdivided; there are still a few birds on the N.S.W. side of the river, especially towards Euston. The only mounds seen were on Kulkynne Station, in the back country. These birds are rapidly decreasing in numbers, due to clearing of their natural cover, and their destruction by foxes. It is said that the loose sand falls in too quickly for a fox to dig out the eggs, but we do not vouch for this. They can apparently exist without water.

Coturnix pectoralis (Stubble Quail)—Plentiful in 1917, when they bred. Odd birds may be flushed in any year of average rainfall; none seen in 1919.

Austrotornix velox (Button Quail)—Plentiful in the spring of 1917 in the Lake Victoria District. At other times they are occasionally seen in the mallee country. We have not found them breeding.

Geopelia placida tranquilla (Peaceful Dove)—Very common and very tame. They are found only on the river banks and box flats, and do not go into the back country. Nests are to be found from April to November.

Stictopelia cuneata (Little Dove)—Locally known as the "Darling Dove." They are found only near the river banks, but not so commonly as the preceding species. They nest in the fruit trees of the irrigation areas.

Phaps chalcoptera (Bronze-winged Pigeon)—Fairly common, usually occurring as single birds or in pairs. They favour the pine belts, but are also to be found near the river.

Ocyphaps lophotes (Crested Bronze-wing)—Found in numbers in both river and back country, but prefers river flats and tobacco bush country. In the late summer and autumn they collect in flocks of 20 or more. They nest freely in the district; on one occasion a bird was seen sitting on an old *Grallina*'s nest.

Hypotaenidia philippensis australis (Landrail)—Quite plentiful in the Wentworth district in 1917 (a flood year). They breed freely in the lucerne patches of the irrigation area. The largest clutch seen consisted of eight eggs.

Microtribonyx ventralis (Black-tailed Native Hen)—Very plentiful in the seasons of 1917, 1918, and 1919, along the rivers and around tanks. Flocks of thousands were to be seen, and they proved very destructive to all green feed and crops of lucerne; a few odd pairs bred, because young ones were seen, but no nests with eggs were taken.

Gallinula tenebrosa (Dusky Moor Hen)—Occasional birds are to be seen along the rivers at all times. But in 1917 they were in numbers in the Lake Victoria district, and bred freely in the "polygonum" swamps. The largest clutch found was seven eggs.

¹³¹¹ *Porphyrio melanotus* (Bald Coot)—Usually a rare bird, but in 1917 they were in numbers on the swamps about Lake Victoria. They bred in that year.

Fulica atra tasmanica (Coot)—Always a few birds about, but very plentiful in 1917. They bred freely in the Lake Victoria and Rufus Creek swamps in that year. Clutches varied from five to nine eggs.

Podiceps cristatus christiani (Tippet Grebe)—Uncommon. They have been seen on the Anabranck, at Lake Victoria and at Kulkyn Lakes; not found breeding.

Tachybaptus ruficollis (Black-throated Grebe)—Found on the river swamps, and also in the tanks far from the river.

Poliiocephalus poliocephalus (Hoary-headed Grebe or Dabchick)—Found in the same situations as the last.

Hydrochelidon leucopareia (Marsh Tern)—Occurred in flocks on the Darling Swamps in 1917; they were not known to breed.

Gelochelidon nilotica macrotarsa (Gull-billed Tern)—In 1917 they were very plentiful in the flooded country near Wentworth. Many nests were found on a small flooded area, about 10 miles from the town. The usual clutch was two eggs, but there were a few clutches of three. The eggs were laid on the bare ground, with a little drift debris around them. They bred in November. Last year odd birds were seen on sandspits of the Murray, and a single bird was seen at Belmore, on a tank about 30 miles from the river.

Bruchigavia novaehollandiae (Silver Gull)—Generally odd birds are to be seen along the river, and on the swamps and lakes. Not breeding.

Erythrogonys cinctus (Red-kneed Dottrel)—Most of the inland tanks and swamps have a pair or more attached to them. In 1917 they bred freely, in the flooded area near Wentworth. Clutches of three and four eggs were found. It appears that some attempt at a nest is made by this species, but not such a definite nest as is made by the Black-fronted Dottrel in this district.

Lobibyx novaehollandiae (Spur-winged Plover)—Fairly common along the rivers. The foxes take a heavy toll of the young and eggs.

Zonifer tricolor (Black-breasted Plover)—Fairly common when season is good; they are not confined to the river country, but may be found far inland. Two nests were found, each containing four eggs, in August, 1919.

Leucopohus ruficapillus (Red-capped Dottrel)—Fairly common. Found both on river banks and on inland tanks. Found breeding in 1917. One nest was found 200 yards from water, out in the salt bush.

Elseya melanops (Black-fronted Dottrel)—Quite plentiful; by far the commonest dottrel all over the district. Breeds regularly.

Himantopus leucocephalus (White-headed Stilt)—Very plentiful in 1917, and breeding freely in the flooded areas—known locally as the "Dog Bird," from its barking cry.

Recurvirostra novaehollandiae (Red-necked Avocet)—A common bird, both on river swamps and inland waters. Apparently only breeds in flood years. Many nests were found in 1917.

Canutus canutus rogersi (Eastern Knot)—Flocks were seen near Wentworth in 1917.

Rostratula australis (Painted Snipe)—Occasionally seen along the Darling in good seasons. A clutch of four eggs was taken in 1917.

Burhinus magnirostris (Stone Plover)—Fairly common near the rivers. A few pairs still breed near Wentworth. The foxes will eventually exterminate them on the mainland.

Austrotis australis (Australian Bustard)—We mention this bird only to say that it is now practically extinct in the district; neither of us have met with it.

Mathewsia rubicunda (Australian Crane or Native Companion)—We heard of this bird as having recently been seen at Lake Yartla and at Lake Kudjée, but did not meet with it ourselves. It is now a rare bird in the district.

Threskiornis molucca strictipennis (White Ibis)—A few birds are seen every year, and they were fairly plentiful in 1917.

Carphibis spinicollis (Straw-necked Ibis)—Quite a common bird, and its value recognised by the land owners. We heard that they bred in 1916, in the polygonum swamps in the Rufus Creek district, but did not meet with it breeding ourselves.

Spatherodia regia (Black-billed Spoonbill).

Platibis flavipes (Yellow-billed Spoonbill)—Both fairly common, but the yellow-billed species the more plentiful. These birds have a peculiar side to side movement of their bills when feeding, describing an arc of a circle. They breed in company with other waders in the high gum-trees of the river fringing.

Herodias alba symmatophorus (White Egret)—A regular inhabitant of the district. Quite numerous in 1917; over twenty birds could be counted at one time on the edge of the flooded country, as the water gradually flowed further and further over, probably after the insects driven out by the advancing water. There is a nesting place on the Murray, where the birds breed with Pacific, white-fronted, and night herons and spoonbills.

Notophya novahollandiae (White-fronted Heron)—Very common. They breed in the gum-trees bordering the rivers, and in trees in flooded country, during flood years. They do not breed in companies as a rule.

Myola pacifica (White-necked Heron)—A common bird; seen more often on shallow lagoons and watercourses than on the rivers. It is a solitary bird; it breeds in the district, generally very high up in the river gums.

Nycticorax caledonicus australasiæ (Nankeen Night Heron)—Plentiful in good seasons, and breed in several localities in the high gums along the Murray. They are fond of sitting out in the river just at dusk, but were never seen to catch anything.

Chenopsis atrata (Black Swan)—Common on all the inland lakes and large swamps. They breed only in good seasons.

Chenonetta jubata (Wood-Duck or Maned Goose)—Fairly plentiful in the district. Prefers inland waters to the main rivers. In 1918 an extraordinary clutch of twenty-four ducklings was counted by three observers at Netherby, on the River Darling.

Casarca tadornoides (Mountain Duck)—A rather rare bird in the district; a few pairs were seen at Lake Victoria, in 1917.

Anas superciliosa (Black Duck)—Very common. Breeds freely in the big gums in good seasons. No broods were seen in 1919.

Virago gibberifrons (Grey Teal)—Very common. Found in the same localities, has the same habits as the last bird.

Spatula rhynchotis (Shoveller)—Fairly plentiful on the inland waters, but rarely comes on to the river.

Malacorhynchus membranaceus (Pink-eared Duck)—Fairly common in good seasons. Breeds in the district.

Stictonetta naevosa (Freckled Duck)—A single bird was shot in the autumn of 1919.

Nyroca australis (White-eyed Duck)—Very numerous at certain times. They were on the Darling and Murray in thousands last summer, about December and January.

Biziya lobata (Musk Duck)—Not common. Pairs are seen occasionally on the swamps and permanent billabongs. They breed in the polygonum swamps.

Phalacrocorax carbo novaehollandiae (Black Cormorant)—Common in the district. They nest in the flooded lake country in good seasons. Many nests are built on the same tree, in company with Darters. They are fond of the carp in the Murray.

Mesocarbo ater (Little Black Cormorant)—Fairly common in the district. Mostly on the Murray.

Hypoleucus varius hypoleucus (Orange-faced Cormorant)—Fairly common along the Murray and Darling.

Microcarbo melanoleucus (Little Pied Cormorant)—Plentiful in the district, and is to be seen all the year round, as are the other species.

Anhinga novaehollandiae (Darter)—This bird is met with occasionally along the Murray and anabranch of the Darling. It seems to prefer inland waters where there is not too much

current. Fair numbers of nests were met with at Kulkyne, on a flooded lake, and in a similar situation at Moorna. They seem to be the earliest layers, breeding in October and November. Many of the birds are black and white, but the mature birds are all black.

Catoptropelicanus conspicillatus (Pelican)—Common on the inland lakes and large sheets of water, and less commonly seen in the rivers themselves. It does not breed in the district.

Circus approximans guttidi (Swamp Hawk)—Uncommon. A few birds were seen hawking over wheat crops in the Renmark district.

Uroaetus audax (Wedge-tailed Eagle)—Plentiful, especially away from the river frontage. They are early breeders, and become very tame where they are not molested. Opinions are divided here, as elsewhere, as to the damage done to lambs by this bird.

Haliastur sphenurus (Whistling Eagle)—The commonest bird of prey in the district. They may be seen in numbers along the Darling and Murray Rivers, and also around all the inland Lakes, and the "box" timber of the anabranch. They breed in the high river gums.

Falco longipennis (Little Falcon)—Not a common bird, but odd pairs are to be seen occasionally. In October, 1919, a nest was seen with the bird sitting, in an unclimbable gum-tree, on the Darling, near Cuthero Station.

Falco hypoleucus (Grey Falcon)—A single pair seen on the Murray, near Chowilla Station, in 1917.

Ieracidea berigora—Not plentiful. They keep mostly to the mallee country, and seldom come near the rivers; a number of pairs were seen on our trip of October, 1919, and although they varied somewhat in colour, no really light-coloured birds were seen, and most of them were quite dark.

Cerchneis cenchroides (Kestrel)—Always to be seen but more common in the back country. They nest in the hollow mallee, using the same hollow, year after year.

Spiloglaux boobook (Boobook Owl)—Fairly common on the Murray and anabranch frontages. They have not been met with in the back country.

Tyto alba delicatula (Delicate Owl)—A pair was seen with fledged young ones at Avoca Station.

(To be continued).