

Notes on Birds seen during a Recent Visit to the Western Darling, N.S.W.

—By A. CHENERY.—

After joining Dr. Macgillivray and his son Ian on August 12th at Broken Hill, our party left that town next day on the first stage to Milparinka. We travelled in a Ford with light lorry body. Mr. and Mrs. W. E. Heywood, of Broken Hill, were also of the party, and used their own Dodge car. Their intention was to spend a holiday in the back country and to traverse portion of the route covered by Capt. Sturt in his expedition into the interior in 1844-45.

Our time was therefore more given up to covering country than to systematic ornithology, and the bird life met with probably did not include all the species that are to be found during a good season such as the present one has been in this portion of our State.

The first stage to Fowler's Gap (75 miles) was completed by sundown and; while having tea by a gum creek, many Bare-eyed Cockatoos and Galahs were flushed from nesting hollows. Everywhere along the road, which for part of the way winds through the Barrier Range and then over open tablelands, herbage and wild flowers were abundant. In the vicinity of Broken Hill at this time the Sturt Pea was in flower, and the sight of an acre or more covered with the brilliant crimson and black blooms of this plant was one which will not readily be forgotten. Ringneck Parrots were also found at their hollows, and Bennett's Crows were circling amongst the mulga timber on the hillsides. This bird appears to have quite a fondness for doing aerial gymnastics, and was often noted during the trip in gatherings of perhaps thirty to fifty birds all in the air together, flying around apparently aimlessly. A single Black Falcon was also identified not far from Fowler's Gap.

An early start on the morning of the 14th enabled us to reach our destination for that day—Mount Sturt homestead, about 16 miles west of Milparinka. While having breakfast on the road, after leaving Fowler's Gap, the first Crested Wedgebills were heard singing. Bennett's Crows' nests were seen between Cobham Lake and Milparinka, but those examined were empty of eggs or young. After spending the night at Mount Sturt, where we received the usual open-handed hospitality from Mr. Arthur Bartlett and his family, we left for Yandanna Station, which is owned by Sir S. Kidman and is stocked with cattle. There is little doubt in my mind that since this owner acquired so many of these West Darling runs and stocked them with cattle in place of the sheep, the natural herbage, especially saltbush, has revived to a marked extent, and the country, at any rate in a good season, has lost the barren aspect so often to be noticed where sheep are heavily stocked. Two miles from Mt. Sturt homestead, on open stony tableland, we saw our first Australian Dottrell. It was only a single bird, and we failed to flush its mate, if it possessed one. Later on we came on a family of five birds, evidently parents and fledged young. While making a short examination of a grove of gidgsa some miles further on many Bennett's Crows' nests were seen and one set of six fresh eggs obtained. A Treecreeper—which I believe was the ordinary brown variety—was seen here, and *Acanthiza uropygialis* was found nesting in its favourite situation—between a loose piece of bark and the trunk of the tree. This nest contained three eggs. Numerous Zebra Finches were nesting, and eggs were in most of the nests. A solitary—as they usually appear to be—Little Eagle was also noted, but no eggs were found, although one nest was found prepared for eggs. There are generally a few green gum leaves in the nests of both this species and those of the Whistling Eagle. The Kite appears to prefer dried cow manure, or some material which closely resembles it, for a lining. In a needlewood, out in more open country, a second set of six fresh Bennett's Crows' eggs were obtained. One may as well remark here that this time, mid-August, appears to be the laying time for these birds, and I am not exaggerating when I say that one could have filled a large billy-can with their eggs during the three weeks we travelled round and then have had some to spare. The same remarks apply to the nesting of the Bare-eyed Cockatoo and the Galah. A solitary Little Falcon was seen hawking out on the tablelands, but where its home was situated remains a mystery, as no second bird was seen along the nearest creek, when we reached it, nor yet in the Gidyea;

After running down a likely looking gum creek for two or three miles after leaving the high ground, we came to Yandama homestead, where Mr. and Mrs. Winton made us welcome. At our late luncheon fresh tomatoes were on the bill of fare, although this was only August. Mr. Winton informed us that they had them practically all the year. A fine excavated tank of water supplies the garden and household requirements. Many fruit trees were lost in the recent drought of 1919-1920, and white ants are a pest hard to combat when they take to the roots, as they do very often in these latitudes. During a walk with Dr. Macgillivray along the Yandama Creek after dinner we flushed a Goshawk from an old engine shed. An outcrop of rock here had evidently been used by the original owners as a source from which to obtain their nuclei for chipping the flakes one picks up so often in the Darling country. An old aboriginal named Joe, of whom more anon, told me that this stone outcrop was Yandama in his tribe's lingo.

During our evening's discussion the further route was now decided upon. A blackboy (aged about 65!) was to be our guide and companion. The road to Callabonna Lake was pronounced possible for car traffic, and the question of petrol supply for the return journey arranged with the kind assistance of our host, Mr. Winton. He also told us that we could get to Fort Grey in the Nor'-West corner, where there was a lake that still held some water, should we decide to go there on our return from Callabonna. Next morning, after loading up the cars with some additional food for ourselves and the engines and duly collecting our guide, we set out for Tilcha Outstation, some 50 miles west. Our guide—"Sit-down Jimmy"—was, we discovered, well-named and did his best to live up to it. Even the opening of the infrequent gates appeared to be almost too great a strain on his energy. At Yandama we came into the kite country again, and numbers of these birds were constantly to be seen hovering round. Their nests were also not uncommon, but none were examined. The country traversed now changed from stony tableland to sandy ridges, covered with mulga and other species of the acacia family. There was nothing of interest seen during the early part of the journey, and we passed through a substantial wire-netted vermin-proof fence into South Australia at a distance of some 37 miles from the homestead. I omitted to mention that there is a blacks' camp a couple of miles from Yandama, which was visited by some of our party while Dr. Macgillivray and myself explored the creek. Amongst the residents was an immigrant lady, who hailed from London town—not the west-end—who is

married to a full-blooded aboriginal named Witchitie. This lady, I was told, did not appear to feel her position as an out-cast in a 'blacks' camp, and referred to her husband as "Mr. Forbes." There were also two copper-coloured young Forbes as the result of the experiment. The diet of carpet snake, lizard and rabbit, with an occasional kangaroo or dingo pup as a tit-bit, appeared to agree with the lady.

So much for this digression, but the case appeared to me worthy of comment.

Shortly after passing into South Australia a Wedge-tailed Eagle was flushed from her nest in a low swamp gum-tree on the right of the track. On climbing a limb on the far side one could look down on to the nest and two fine eggs were visible, but all one's efforts to climb over the edge of the nest from below or to cross over to it from another limb proved futile, and without a rope we were compelled to give it up. A little later we reached Tilcha Out-station, near a creek of the same name, and here we were provided with a late luncheon by Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. After a chat with the men we left on the last stage of our journey for Tilcha bore, 20 miles on, and thence to Callabonna hut. The country around Tilcha is more open again, but some sandy patches were met with before reaching the bore.

There was practically no bird life of interest seen on the way, although the country was in good heart everywhere—shrubs in bloom and wild flowers in abundance.

Tilcha bore water is hot and, after rising a foot above the pipe discharges into the creek, which it keeps running for some twenty miles through sandy country, and by this fact one can realise that the flow must be of considerable volume. The trees in the immediate neighbourhood of the hot water are dead, but lower down, when the water has cooled, and by so doing has deposited some of its "salts in solution," the trees and vegetation on its banks seem to thrive and the stock drink it freely. On humans, until they get used to it, it acts as most mineralised waters do, and has a tendency to reduce corpulence. On crossing from one side of this creek to the other, while following an alleged track, one of the cars—the Dodge—became bogged, and by the time we had it out of difficulties it was time to camp. The sandhills in this region run in a general direction east and west—the prevailing winds being north and south—and our road fortunately was almost due west. If it had not been for this fact no car could have negotiated the sandhills, which were as steep as the side of a house and threatened to obliterate the creek in places. Timber—mostly

needle-wood and mulga—Blue-bonnets, Galahs, Bare-eyed Cockatoos, Warbling Grass Parakeets, Kites, Whistling Eagles, and Bennett's Crows were plentiful here, and Owllet Nightjars were heard during the evening. In the morning a fine Black Falcon flew up the creek and a Little Eagle was seen. As we intended working this creek more thoroughly on our return, no time was spent on the outward journey, and we were soon on our way to Callabonna Out-station. This was reached over a bad road at 2 p.m. The creek runs out into marshy land some eight miles before reaching the homestead, which is quite near the shores of the Lake. After a chat with Mr. Bill Hayes, who is in charge, and a consultation in which Boulka Fred, another smiling old fraud of a blackboy, and Sit-down Jimmy took part, we set off to search for the site of the fossil remains situate somewhere on the 100-mile circumference of this Lake. I believe that this measurement is an exaggeration, but I am repeating it as a sample of the information supplied locally, which is more than half hearsay.

It must be quite twenty years ago that the late Mr. Zietz and party established a camp at this fossil deposit, and on behalf of the South Australian Museum obtained the remains of the *Diprotodon*, a complete skeleton of which in the Museum at present is a standing memorial to the patience and skill of Mr. Zietz. The local aboriginals informed us that they knew where this camp had been. Mr. Hayes could not give us any definite information on the subject. He, however, started Boulka Fred and another ancient off in a buckboard and we followed. There was no road, and the surface over which we had to travel was typical of this wind-swept desert salt lake country. However, we managed to get some eight miles along the lake to a small water-course opposite an island out in the lake, and there we decided to camp, still a good mile from the margin of the lake proper—a glistening expanse of salt.
