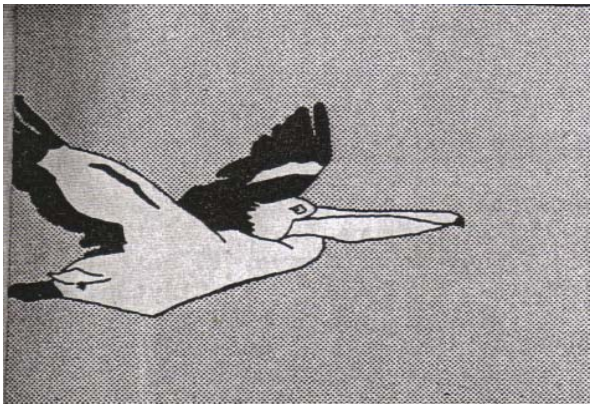

Canberra bird notes

No.8 July 1970

EDITORIAL

On April 15, 1970, our organisation was officially re-named the Canberra Ornithologists Group. As such it has ceased to function as a branch of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, but is seeking affiliation under article 67 of the Union's Articles of Association.

Interstate subscribers may feel isolated by the rather provincial overtones of both the journal's title and our group's name. I would like to stress here that financial subscribers to Canberra Bird Notes are ipso facto full members of the Canberra Ornithologists Group whether they reside in the Federal Capital, interstate or overseas. And while we are on the subject subscriptions for 1970-71 are now due. So, wherever you are, don’t let your membership lapse. Send one dollar to our Secretary at 24 Adair Street, Scullin, A.C.T., 2611.

A TRIP TO COOBER PEDY

Mark Clayton

Coober Pedy lies approximately 400 miles by road from Port Augusta, S.A., and 500 miles south of Alice Springs, N.T. The landscape is very flat, the only relief being in the form of mullock heaps from the opal mines. The climate is semi-arid and vegetation is sparse. The dominant tree is Desert Oak, Grevillea Sp, which grows to a height of about 25 feet and is the main tree used for nesting. Low scrubby bushes such as saltbushes and small acacias provide other cover for birds. In some areas the desert oaks grow in clumps, and birds tend to congregate in these.

From August 25 to August 31 , 1969, I was on a bus trip to Coober Pedy and the surrounding countryside. Notes were kept for each day, from which the following have been extracted. Conditions for observing were ideal, except on the 29th which was wet and windy.

All distances given are by road. The scientific names are those from "A Handlist of the Birds of South Australia" by H.T. Condon, 1968.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

WHISTLING KITE Haliastur sphenurus One bird was seen on the 31st as it alighted on a nest about ten feet off the ground, several miles south of Coober Pedy.

LITTLE FALCON Falco longipennis Two birds had a nest about 40 feet up in a eucalypt in a dry creek-bed on the 27th. The birds here were very light in colour compared with our local ones.

BROWN FALCON Falco berigora Two birds seen at the Break-away about 25 miles north of Coober Pedy, on the 28th.

KESTREL Falco cenchroides Several were seen in various localities around Coober Pedy. An interesting point noted was that on two occasions Kestrels were found nesting in disused crow nests while crows nested on the other side of the same tree.

CRESTED PIGEON Ocyphaps lophotes Three separate birds were seen in a dry creek-bed about 15 miles west of Goober Pedy on the 27th. The creek appeared to flood after rain, as there was a great accumulation of debris against the trunks of eucalypts growing in the bed. This was the thickest concentration of trees for many miles.

COCKATIEL Nymphicus hollandicus Three were seen flying along the dry creek-bed on the 27th.

BUDGERIGAR Melopsittacus undulatus Noted in small flocks in various localities from the 27th onward.

TAWNY FROGMOUTH Podargus strigoides One bird was found with two recently hatched young in the creek-bed on the 27th. The bird resented my interest with much teak-snapping and fluffed itself up till it looked twice its normal size.

HORSFIELD BRONZE CUCKOO Chrysococcyx basalis One bird calling at the creek-bed on the 27th. Possibly it parasitises Orange Chats or Eastern Whitefaces.

WELCOME SWALLOW Hirundo tahitica Found mostly in Coober Pedy itself although several were seen around the diggings. The species possibly nests in old mine-shafts. At Kingoonya, 200 miles south of Coober Pedy, a swallow had a nest 30 feet down a shaft.

WHITE-BACKED SWALLOW Cheramoeca leucosternum Noted mostly in pairs. This species probably also nests in disused mines. As with the Welcome Swallow, it was seen every day.

WILLY WAGTAIL Rhipidura leucophrys Two were seen on the 27th in the creek-bed.

CINNAMON QUAIL THRUSH Cinclosoma cinnamomeum This bird was usually encountered in pairs in low scrubby areas mixed with gibbers. When flushed it flew very rapidly just above the ground and was very hard to re-locate, its colour harmonising perfectly with the surroundings. It was first seen on the 25th, and noted daily thereafter.

ORANGE CHAT Epthianura aurifrons Probably the commonest small bird around Cobber Pedy. Pairs were seen on every excursion, usually in low scrub. It is a confiding bird, allowing approach to within a few feet. On the 25th one was noted carrying food about a mile out of town. This species' colour also blended well with the environment.

EASTERN WHITEFACE Aphelocephala leucopsis Observed in several localities. On the 27th several birds were feeding two recently fledged young.

CHESTNUT-TAILED THORNBILL Acanthiza uropygialis Two were seen on the 29th at the Breakaway in some very scrubby acacias.

WESTERN GRASS WREN Amytornis textilis Only two birds were seen, in an area of canegrass about three miles west of Coober Pedy on the 25th. They were very Maluroid in their actions, hopping about over the ground and through branches. When disturbed they were very difficult to flush from cover. The birds appeared to be an isolated pair, as there was no other suitable habitat for many miles around.

BLACK-FACED WOODSWALLOW Artamus cinereus_ A small flock of about eight birds was flying very high three miles west of Coober Pedy on the 25th. This species seemed to be the common woodswallow of drier interior.

SINGING HONEYEATER Meliphaga_virescens Two separate parties were noted. One party was feeding two recently fledged young.

WHITE-PLUMED HONEYEATER Meliphaga pencillata Several birds were noted at the dry creek-bed on the 27th. The birds here were very yellowish compared with our greener local birds.

PIPIT Anthus_novaeseelandiae. Wherever there was ground cover this bird could be found. One nest was discovered about five miles north of Coober Pedy. The adult bird was dead by the nest and an attempt to save the young nestling failed.

ZEBRA PINCH Poephila guttata Common in small flocks everywhere. A nest with five eggs was found in the base of an old crow nest.

LITTLE CROW Corvus bennetti Common in pairs and sometimes in flocks of up to 16 birds. They were nesting in very large numbers.

23_Nardoo Crescent, 0'Connor, A.C.T.

BREEDING OP THE HOARY-HEADED GREBE IN RELATION TO WATER LEVELS

Anthony H. D'Andria & Wim J. Vestgens

Observations

On December 11, 1969, Hoary-headed Grebes Podiceps poliocephalus were present in hundreds on Lake Bathurst, N.S.W. We found a great number of their nests, both active and deserted, on the lake's islets.

The deserted nests marked the former higher levels of the lake; most still contained eggs. It appeared that the grebes were abandoning their nests as soon as the water receded past them, and building new ones further out from shore. Evidence of this was clearly seen on one mud islet, about 1/8 acre in area, situated about half a mile from the main lake shore.

The islet was ringed by an outer fringe of 16 active nests in shallow water, while 12 other nests - all deserted - dotted the bare mud below the vegetation zone. One abandoned nest was actually standing in water, but a narrow ridge of exposed mud joining it to the islet had evidently been enough to cause its occupants to desert. Many eggs lay on the lake bottom and on dry ground near the nests.

All nests were built almost exclusively of the submergent water-milfoil (Myriophyllum sp.) which infests the lake. The dimensions of 27-eggs taken from abandoned-nests ranged from 42.3 x 28.8 mm to 35.5 x 25.2 mm, with a mean 39.3 x 27.2 mm. The clutch sizes in active nests comprised three C/1 , one C/2, nine C/3, two C/4 and one C/6. All the abandoned nests contained full clutches, i.e. between four and six eggs.

Our criteria for concluding that a nest was abandoned were the following? 1. No bird left the nest at our approach; 2. Eggs not covered; 3. Eggs disarranged, some lying outside the nest: 4. Eggs cold and badly stained. Only nests conforming to all four conditions were taken to be abandoned.

Discussion

That all species of grebe build floating nests is a well-known phenomenon, but the reasons why they do so apparently have not been investigated. Presumably the trait operates as a defence against predation, eliminating the need for breeding grebes to emerge onto dry land where they are awkward and vulnerable. It is interesting to note that the Divers (Gaviidae) which are not related to the grebes but even clumsier on land, build their nests on the banks of lochans and meres in the Northern Hemisphere, but invariably so close to the water that the sitting bird can slide directly from the nest into it, (Bannermany 1959).

There are many references in the literature to grebe nests being flooded and destroyed by rises in water level, As well, many instances are recorded of whole breeding colonies being lost through the drying up of lakes or ponds. Dr Finnur Gudmundsson wrote (in Bannerman, 1959) about the breeding of the Slavonian or Horned Grebe Podiceps auritus on Lake Myvatn., Iceland:-

"In other cases, nests may be found on relatively dry banks of lakes or on sandy or gravelly shores of lakes, but such nests are most likely built ... at a time when the water-level is considerably higher."

It is not stated whether these nests were active or not.

cont/

North (1911) makes no mention of grebe nests being abandoned because of falling water levels.

Our observations at Lake Bathurst seem to indicate that the instinct for floating nests is strongly developed in the Hoary-headed Grebe, to the extent that it persists even when proving quite detrimental by repeatedly disrupting the birds' breeding cycle.

References

Bannerman, D.A., 1959c Vol. VIII. The Birds of the British Isles, London - Oliver & Boyd.

North, A.J., 1914c, Nests and Eggs of birds found breeding in Australia and Tasmania, Vol, IV. Sydney - F.W. White.

10 McCrae Street, Garran, A.C.T.

43 Sherbrooke Street, Ainslie, A.C.T.

CANBERRA SIGHTINGS OF S.A. SILVER GULLS

Following Dr Garrick's letter in CBN No. 7, the following sightings at Lake Burley Griffin of gulls banded in South Australia were forwarded to us by the Australian Bird-banding Scheme:-

Date sighted	Band Number	Date & Place banded
18 June, 1969	081-54504	19/8/68 - St Kilda,
18 June, 1969	58151	5/8/68 - Lake Mulgundawa
12 Feb., 1969	65314	14/10/68 - Lake Hawdon

All the above were banded as runners.

BIRD CASUALTIES ON A.C.T ROADS

Michael Carins

During the past 22 months I have travelled to the Orroral Valley from Canberra at regular intervals. Almost all journeys were made between 2300 and 0100 hrs, 0700 and 0900 hrs, and 1500 and 1700 hrs. The total distance travelled is in excess of 37 000 miles. Throughout this period a rough check of dead birds on the road was made. My findings are summarised below.

Raptors (Falconiformes) I have one report of a car striking a large hawk near the top of Fitz's Hilly but this is believed to be an exception since a Nankeen Kestrel Falco cenchroides chasing a small bird was able to overtake a car travelling at 50 m.p.h. while flying at 45 degrees to the vehicle's path.

Owls (Strigiformes). Owls have been seen sitting immobile in the middle of the road at night. On one occasion an owl stooped on something about ten yards in front of the car. Although no bodies have been found they can be expected in the morning.

ROSELLA Platycercus spp. Numbers of Eastern Rosella P. eximius have been seen on the road Particularly near the entrance to "Lanyon" on the Tharwa Road. At "Lanyon" a flight-line is believed to cut directly across the road and on one occasion a car struck flock, killing five and injuring several others. Crimson Rosella P. elegans are occasionally seen. The mortality of Rosellas is almost certainly due to their habit of sweeping low across the road at right angles to traffic. They seem to be incapable of avoiding vehicles travelling in excess of 50 m.p.h

cont/

GALAH Cacatua roseicapilla Although bodies are sometimes seen, these are not as common as one might expect, probably owing to their flying higher above roads than rosellas.

PEEWEE Grallina cyanoleuca Possibly the most frequent casualty after magpies, but it is not always possible to identify mangled and flattened remains. Since the species is less commonly seen than the Magpie, deaths can only be attributed to birds flying away from mud or water at the roadside.

BLACK/WHITE-BACKED MAGPIE Gymnorhina tibicen Almost certainly the most frequent casualty. Along most stretches of metalled road birds seem to lose all fear of vehicles, frequently just walking to the verge. When this species flies away from a car the flight is usually laboured and slow. Accidents are most frequent in the morning and in spring.

From a very cursory examination it would appear that juveniles have a higher rate of mortality than adults, and that mortality in most species is highest between dawn and 0800 hrs, on cloudy cool mornings after rain - birds appear much slower under these circumstances.

Insufficient evidence exists to state a relationship between vehicle speed and accidents, but most accidents reported to me occurred at speeds in excess of 40 m.p.h.

2/65 Melba Street, Downer A.C.T.

Editor's Note Much valuable information could be gained if members made it a point to examine all birds seen dead on the road. Details of the species, locality and date should be forwarded to me. Fresh specimens can be popped into plastic bags, deep-frozen and also despatched hither so that sex and stomach contents can be determined. This should be a worthwhile project for the C.O.G.

SIGHT RECOGNITION OF CORMORANTS

Gerard F. van Tets

Four species of cormorant occur in the A.C.T. They are the Black Cormorant Phalacrocorax carbo, the Pied Cormorant Ph. varius, the Little Pied Cormorant Ph. melanoleucos and the Little Black Cormorant Ph. sulcirostris. These birds are called "shags" "by fishermen and New Zealanders.

Adult cormorants are fairly easy to recognise to species, but juveniles and immatures may cause problems. Outlined below are some helpful and some not so helpful clues.

Size The Black and the Pied are large, the Little Black is intermediate and the Little Pied is small. At rest the Little Pied is relatively squat and more hunched up than the other species.

General Plumage The Black and the Little Black are all black and/or brown. The Pied and the Little Pied are black and/or brown above and white below. Some juvenile and immature Black are partly white below out with no sharp demarcation between the black and white areas as in Pied and Little Pied. Some juvenile and immature Pied and Little Pied may have irregular dark spots below. Immatures and non-breeding adults are faded brown where breeding adults are black. The plumage of juveniles looks silky, and is darker, glossier and more adult-like than that of immatures and non-breeding adults.

cont/

Head Plumage The head plumage is all dark in the Little Black, dark with a broad pale throat band in the Black, and dark above and white below in Pied and Little Pied. Immediately above the face and eye the feathers are dark in juvenile and immature Little Pied and white in Pied and adult Little Pied.

Thigh Plumage The thighs are totally dark in Black and Little Black, white on the inside and dark on the outside in Pied and in juvenile and immature Little Pied, and all white in adult Little Pied.

Nuptial Plumes Nuptial plumes are prominent during the courtship phase and some plumes may persist at least until the end of incubation. They consist mainly of: a median black erectile crest on nape and upper hind neck, and prominent white patches on the sides of the upper neck and on the sides of the rump in the Black; a thin white line over the eye and a white tuft behind the eye in the Little Black; a median erectile crest on the forehead and vertical white frills on the sides of the black crown in the Little Pied; and none have been described for the Pied.

Gular Pouch or Throat The naked area underneath the bill is yellow or orange in the Black and Little Pied, greenish-blue in the Pied and blue-grey in the Little Black.

Bill The bill is dark grey in Black and Pied, grey with a black ridge in the Little Black and yellow with a brown ridge in the Little Pied.

Other soft parts The naked facial area is yellow or orange in Black, Pied and Little Pied, and blue-grey in the Little Black. The iris is brown in the Little Pied and in juvenile Black, Pied and Little Black; yellow in immature and green in adult Black, Pied and Little Black.

4 Tasman Place, Lyons, A.C.T.

More on Mynas

INDIAN MYNAS IN QUEANBEYAN

David Peters

On three occasions recently Indian Mynas Acridotheres tristis have teen observed in the region of the Queanbeyan River bridge near the Leagues Club motel.

The original sighting (Dec. 14, 1969) was of three birds possibly a family group. The latest sighting (Dec. 26, was of four birds which appeared to be fighting. One bird crossed the river to a willow which may have contained a fifth bird.

In Melbourne I have noticed that Indian Mynas occur in areas where there are old sheds and out buildings and the recent sightings in Canberra seem to be in similar areas. Could it be that such surroundings are a necessary breeding habitat for these birds, although the nests themselves do not have to be in the out-buildings?

JUVENILE MYNAS SEEN

Ian C. Betts

At about 0630 hrs on March 13, 1970 I saw two adult Mynas feeding in the gutter in Uriarra Road, Queanbeyan. I can recall having seen two birds about a year ago in the same place both being adults.

cont/

At about 1730 hrs I took a walk across the river and down the park which runs alongside the bank. Feeding at the edge of the grass, almost under the trees, were two adult Mynas being followed by three juveniles. These latter were not begging or being fed or feeding themselves but appeared to be watching the adults feed. They were smaller than the adults and generally duller. They also lacked the black head, this area being the same dull brownish colour as the body.

18 Selwyn Street, Hackett, A.G.T.

2/1 154 Monaro Street, Queanbeyan, N.S.W

Ian Betts' observations suggest that the Indian Myna has nested in the vicinity of Queanbeyan. We are now waiting for a confirmed nesting record for this species in the A.C.T. David Peters' article should give good clues to members as to where to look for nests.

Further records of Mynas in and near Canberra are included under Short Observations.

Editor

REGENT MEETINGS

April 15

Some very fine photographic slides of Macquarie Island were shown by Wim Vestjens, who deputised at short notice for Dr McTaggart Cowan who was indisposed.

Mr Vestjens outlined the island's history since it was discovered in 1810 and touched on the ravages perpetrated by sealers on its penguin and seal populations. The speaker, who has spent two years on Macquarie Island as a member of ANARE, then described some aspects of its bird-life.

Macquarie Island lies about 800 miles south-east of Tasmania, and politically is part of that state. Most of its area of 21 miles by two consists of a plateau at a general elevation of 800 feet, falling away sharply to the sea or to a narrow coastal fringe. The mean temperature is 40 deg. F. with very little variation. Misty rain and snow are common.

Although there are no trees, the shrub vegetation, is luxuriant. Penguins and albatrosses breed on the island in large numbers and the fur-seals and elephant seals are re-colonising their former haunts.

April 26

Eight members and friends attended the second outing of the Canberra Ornithologists Group. A half-days walk along the southern shore of Lake George produced 57 species of birds. The most interesting were two Sea Eagles, two Peregrine falcons, 200-300 Pink-eared Ducks and an unexpected eight Red-kneed Dotterels.

cont/

About 30 Whistling Kites were present - the largest number ever recorded in this area. Hundreds of Little Grebes formed a huge floating raft close to shore. Other interesting species were White-headed Stilts, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, Mountain Ducks and Speckled Warblers.

A small team of bird-banders has banded more than 8,000 birds in nine years of mist-netting in wet sclerophyll forest near Bull's Head in the A,C.T. In a lively and thought-provoking talk, Gerald Horey described some aspects of biological significance that have emerged from the mass of data accumulated during this period.

The speaker concentrated on one species - the White-browed Scrub Wren, a bird of the lower shrub layers which is resident in this area. Graphs shown indicated that this population of scrub-wrens followed a build-up to gradual decline to build-up pattern. This was in direct contrast to observations on Palaearctic species by Wynne-Edwards, Lack and others recording gradual rises in population to a peak, followed by a sudden crash. Mr Horey put forward his own hypothesis to account for the phenomenon, and compared the pattern with that of the Brown Thornbill, which occurs in the same habitat but differs markedly in its behaviour and ecology.

Dr van Tets used blackboard sketches to effect in his Birds of the Month talk on cormorants. His hints for the sight recognition of the four cormorant species in the A.C.T. are reproduced elsewhere in this issue.

June 10

Owing to a lack of field trips Dr Fullagar was only able to mention the Gould Petrel in passing and show a few slides of this bird and its sole nesting habitat on Tree Island. He hopes to make a survey of species as has been done for the shearwaters on Montague Island.

The bulf his talk concentrated on the three common species of shearwater found around Australian coasts -the Sooty, Short-tailed and Wedge-tailed. With the aid of slides and enlivening tape-recordings the identification of the three species was discussed. He also covered the study project on Montague Island, which began in 1960, and pointed out an apparent rise in numbers of the Short-tailed at the expense of the Wedge-tailed Shearwater, the explanation for which is uncertain.

The "Bird of the Month" lecture was provided by Tony Stokes who compared five male pink and red robins found in the A.C.T. by means of a simple but effective field identification key.

June 21

A total of 43 species was recorded by the 16 members who joined the outing to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. The feeding-tables were a major attraction, with several bowerbirds, including fully-coloured adult males, being seen at close range. Two Rainbow Lorikeets were also at the tables. The Lyrebirds put on a good vocal display and several display-mounds were found.

COMING MEETINGS

July 8 Annual General Meeting and Brains Trust.

August 12 "Corellas at Kununurra" - Dr van Tets. Both at CSIRO Lecture Theatre, Black Mountain, at 8 p.m.

BOOK REVIEWS

BIRDS AND YOUR GARDEN

Australian Native Gardens and Birds

Barbara Salter - Jacaranda $1.95

Trees and Shrubs to Attract Birds

Dept. of Interior "One-sheet Answer" free

The Bird Table Book

Tony Soper - Pan "books |0o80c

An important point to remember when trying to attract birds to the garden is to provide suitable habitat as well as food. Barbara Salter covers both aspects very well in an easily read book which contains good colour photographs of birds and plants. The book gives instructions on how to set up feeders for honey-eaters and other birds and has notes on the bird attracting properties of various native plants. As Barbara Salter is an acknowledged expert in this field her book is a must for anyone who wishes to have birds in their garden, especially honeyeaters.

The leaflet produced by the Parks and Gardens section of Interior lists native and introduced trees and shrubs which will attract birds and also survive the Canberra climate. It may help in selecting from Barbara Salter's book those species to plant here, as her book was written with a coastal climate in mind.

The Bird Table Book suffers the disadvantage of being written for European gardens. However, it is a pleasant and entertaining book which provides useful tips for attracting birds which are as valid here as in Europe.

GSC

Common Australian Birds

Alan & Shirley Bell - Oxford University Press $6.00 218 pp,

There is little that can be said in favour of this book. On the credit side, the production is of a high standard and the text is easy to read, while the author's conservationist sentiments would find ready sympathy in many readers. The lay-out, with a drawing of the bird facing the text for each of the 100 or so species, is commendable.

It is a great pity that with all these advantages the book should be loaded with such inaccurate and fanciful illustrations. Only a small minority of these are acceptable. Most are ludicrous, and a few are down-right grotesque. Mistakes in shape, details of soft parts, posture and colouring are too numerous to be due to chance.

It is stated on the dust-jacket that Shirley Bell is a landscape artist who has recently turned her attention to birds. After seeing her efforts, and bearing in mind the contention that good landscape painters rarely make good portraitists, I feel sure that she paints beautiful landscapes.

AHD

SHORT OBSERVATIONS

BLACK-BREASTED BUZZARD Hamirostra melanosterna An immature in flight 25 miles south of Yass on February 20, 1970 (J. McKean).

INDIAN MYNA Acridotheres tristis Three on the Federal Highway on January 27, 1970 (J. Forshaw).

Two in Brisbane Avenue, Canberra, on June 12 and 17, 1970.

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Canberra Bird Notes is published quarterly by the Canberra Ornithologists Group. The annual subscription is $1, payable in July of each year to the Secretary.

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