

NOTES ON SOME SPECIES OF TASMANIAN BIRDS.

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With a view of contributing towards the information already possessed concerning our Tasmanian birds, I venture to offer for the perusal of those members of our Society who take an interest in ornithology, a few remarks on some of the most noteworthy of the species frequenting the district I have been residing in. There is up to the present time a great lack of published matter relating to the habits, economy, and natural history in general, of Australian birds. Gould's great work, excelling to a high degree in some points, while it is deficient in others, is a mere foundation for future naturalists to work on. We cannot be contented to refer to it, the more so, as there are comparatively speaking so few copies in existence, and before we attain to that knowledge requisite to a perfect acquaintance with the most beautiful section of the animal creation in our province, we must have our Yarrells and our Berwicks, as a well as a host of observers, who will, after the manner of the many writers in the "Zoologist," "Naturalist," "Annals and Magazine of Natural History," and other British ornithological periodicals, record the result of their labours and researches in local publications. It is to be hoped that, as population increases, a keener interest will be taken in its natural history, and that our local Museum will contain type collections fitted for the instruction of enquirers into that branch of study, while books of reference, the result of the labours of residents in the island, will be forthcoming to assist the youth of the colony in their researches.

Cullenswood,

6th June, 1874.

PEZOPORUS FORMOSUS, *Illiger*.

The ground Parakeet is numerous in the Epacris-covered hills along the East Coast, between Falmouth and George's Bay, evincing, as Gould noticed in his day, a partiality for the grass-tree (*Xanthorrhœa*) districts. Among such vegetation it is invariably found, alighting in similar spots after being flushed. Although as a rule, it resorts to its characteristic

short, twisting flight and sudden descent to the ground, in order to conceal itself on being disturbed, it will, at times, pass over a considerable distance in order to escape pursuit. Its apparent inability to perch, is one of the most singular points in its economy, for there is nothing in the formation of the hallux or other toes which would incapacitate it for this mode of rest, its feet being far more adapted for it, than those of the *Ardeidæ* and *Tantalidæ* which exhibit such a remarkable aptitude for standing with great ease on the smallest twigs or branches; whether or not, therefore, it is incapable of perching, is a feature yet to be determined on by future observers of the bird in *captivity*, but as far as can be judged, its natural instinct forces it entirely to resort to the ground, in support of which I would mention that the district above mentioned is dotted over with small clumps of dwarf peppermint and other shrubs, into which I have several times almost driven the bird, but it invariably chose to dart round them, preferring to alight in the open, among epacris and grass-trees.

The central feathers of the tail of a Victorian specimen from the Carrum swamp, attain a length of 7·2 inches, the wing measuring 5, while a bird of the year from this coast has these 6·5 and 4·8 respectively. Gould remarks that the sexes are entirely alike, but on a casual observation even, the difference in the under surface is recognisable, the male having the lower pectoral region and abdomen much yellower, with bars of less width than the female. The difference between fully adult birds and those of the year, which have not reached maturity, is also very distinct: while the iris of the former is brown, this part in the latter is mottled with grey and the dark markings of the throat, which in old birds are mesial lines, have the shape of central spots in the immature example. Young females have the lower parts of the under surface with comparatively little yellow, the dark bars being broad and conspicuous and the margins of the feathers dark green; the frontal band is narrower than in the adult male, the green of the upper surface much darker, the primary quill spots less developed, and the tail darker; the lateral and central rectrices have, likewise, the yellow bars narrower, showing more of the ground colour; and, what is most noteworthy, the second longest pair are *uniform* greenish brown, without a trace of the bars which are present in the adult.* The food of those I have examined consisted of small seeds of grass and epacris plants.

* From want of further examples for examination I do not know whether this is a sexual peculiarity.

STIPITURUS MALACHURUS, *Lesson*.

This remarkable little bird, so local in its distribution in Tasmania, is abundant in the districts above-mentioned, frequenting the sides of the low hills where they are clothed with epacris, mimosa, and other stunted vegetation, as well as the tall grass and reed beds around lagoons and damp hollows. In the middle of the day it resorts to the small clumps of dwarf Eucalyptus above alluded to, in which its presence is betrayed, by its tiny note of *tze-tze*, resembling more the sound of an insect than the voice of a bird. When in these situations, it is useless to disturb them, as they at once take to the ground and disappear with wonderful quickness, but by remaining quiet a sight of the diminutive Emu-wren will soon be gained as he darts up to an outstanding twig, or the top of some tall reed-stalk; at such times when "twitting" about with the restless movements common to the *malurinae* the tail is generally retroverted over the back giving the bird a quaint appearance. An example from Victoria has the central tail feathers 4.75 inches in length, while the longest pair of 5 Tasmanian examples before me, measure, 4.4: as a rule the balance as regards size is always in favour of Tasmanian species of birds common to both continent and island, but the above disparity may not be constant. The measurements of a fine male from this district are:—Total length, 6.4; tail, 4.4; lateral tail feather, 2.1; tarsus, 0.7; mid-toe, 0.45; claw, 0.17; bill at front, 0.37; weight, $\frac{3}{4}$ oz. In the female the bill is of a lighter colour than in the opposite sex, the blue superciliary and lower white eyelid* are wanting as well as the blue throat and striæ of the head; the web of the tail feathers is rounded at the top and not pointed as in the male; it also stands out more direct from the shaft making the feathers broader than those of the male.

LOBIVANELLUS LOBATUS, *Vicill*.

The Wattled Pewit, or Spur-winged Plover, has for some reason or another been omitted from the avifauna of Tasmania. Gould remarks of it, in speaking of its supposed absence from this country: "It is not improbable that it will hereafter be found to be an inhabitant of that island," writing at the same time that it is numerous on the islands of Bass Straits. It does not appear in Krefft's list of our birds, nor is it mentioned in Mr. Allport's additions to it, *vide* Papers of Royal Society of Tasmania, 1868, although this gentleman says that it occurs at times in the south of the island. It occasionally visits this district at the latter end of summer, and likewise (as I am informed) after wet weather, during

* Omitted in Gould's figure.

the winter. I met with a flock of four on the 10th of March last on the banks of the Break-of-Day River, procuring two fine examples, and since that date, I have observed on two occasions isolated individuals on marshy land in the same locality. Our Wattled Pewitt is an exceedingly fine member of the *Charadrinæ*, surpassing in size most of the Indian species of the family. I venture to append dimensions of an example in my collection, the bird not having before been published as occurring in the Island,—*Male*, total length, 15 inches; wing, 9·9; tail, 4·4; tarsus, 3·2; bare tibia, 1·1; mid toe and claw, 1·7; bill to gape, 1·45; wattles, 1·3 from eye to tip; spur, 0·6. Predom of the tibia is a dull magenta, while the tarsus and foot are greenish purple, with the edges of the scales of a lighter hue; iris, golden yellow; bill, with the tip dusky fleshy, and the basal portions, together with the wattles and orbital skin, primrose yellow. The note of this bird is very distinct from that of the Black-breasted Pewit, from which it may be readily distinguished at a distance by its much larger size, and bold showy aspect.

ÆGIALITES MONACHA, Gould.

Our great pioneer in Australian ornithology appears to have fallen into error concerning the Hooded Dotterel, as is shewn in his fine plate of the bird, in which he has figured the female with a *light* head, and describes that part as thus differing from the male in his accompanying notice of the species* A possible cause of the mistake might have been that all the examples of females which fell to his gun, were immature birds, but such a coincidence would be strange, when we know what a hard working naturalist he was. I am not able to state whether the young have the head concolorous with the hind neck as I have not as yet handled immature examples, but I can state with certainty that two females now before me, shot during the last breeding season, have the "hood" and throat coal black—as deep as the hue of the male—and the white and black markings of the hind neck identical with those of the latter sex; furthermore, among the scores of this dotterel, which I have seen this year on the beaches of the East Coast, I have not observed a single bird with the grey head, depicted in Gould's work. This species "nests" on the sand, above high water mark, and does not appear to sit much on its eggs during the heat of the day, trusting, I presume, in common with most of the *Pressirostris*, to the good offices of the sun to perform the work of incubation. A nest which I found on the 10th of January last, was a hole scraped in the sand about 40 yards from the tidal mark, and situated on a slight rise,

* The experience of other observers on this subject, is much needed.

formed by the sand being blown round a piece of dry kelp; it did not contain the fragments of shells as a lining, common to the nests of most of the family, the eggs being deposited on the bare sand; they were three in number, of a "stone white" ground colour, spotted and marked throughout with two shades of sepia, beneath which were blotches of bluish grey. The markings did not assume the linear shape usual in the eggs of these birds. The dimensions were—axis, 1.43; diameter 1.05 inches.

FULICA AUSTRALIS, Gould.

This species, which is omitted in Mr. Krefft's list, and mentioned in Gould's monograph as inhabiting Tasmania, requires working out, as the latter author is of opinion that the Australian Coots are referable to two distinct species, not, however, explaining the distinctive characteristics which led him to that belief; unfortunately, moreover, according to the rule adopted throughout the work, he gives no *measurements*, and as these—the main desideratum in ornithological study—are wanting, his plate is of little use to subsequent observers in tracing out the value of the two supposed forms. A score of examples will be required from Western Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, and Tasmania before the problem can be solved. Should the presence of two distinct coots in Australia prove a reality, it will be a matter of more than ordinary interest to ornithologists.

I give the dimensions of a, presumably, immature example, shot on the Break-of-Day River in August, 1868—Wing, 7.1 inches; tarsus, 2; mid toe and claw, 3; hind toe and claw, 1.1; bill at front, including casque, 1.6. The iris was dark brown, the bill blackish brown with a light tip, and the legs blackish, as against "red," "light blueish-grey," and "French grey" of the same parts in Gould's adult figure, which he refers to the bird inhabiting Tasmania. The crown in my example is concolorous with the black head, the upper surface olivaceous brown, with a cinereous blue wash across the back, and the breast and abdomen plumbeous grey, paling, on the latter part, where the feathers are margined whitish.

PHALACROCORAX MELANOLEUCOS, Vicill.

In Gould's notice of this cormorant, he remarks, "I suspect that the young assume the white plumage of the under surface from the period of their leaving the nest." There is, however, a marked difference between the immature and the adult dress, which I will here diagnose. In the fully fledged young, about the month of February, the supercillium is a mere thin white line, the lower part of the neck and breast are washed with a rusty yellow, with traces of brown on the

sides of the breast and the belly ; in the adult the white extends some distance above the eye, and the neck and whole of the under surface are pure white. The upper plumage, likewise, differs in the young, in being dark brown, with the head and hind neck feathers edged rusty, and the back and scapular feathers margined with rusty grey, whereas in the adult the upper surface is shining black. A further stage in the immature garb consists in the yellow disappearing to a considerable extent from the neck and chest, being conspicuous only on the breast ; the upper surface becomes darker, and the grey lustre on the scapular and tertial feathers more noticeable.