

BIRDS

by L. E. Wall

Only two papers appear to have been published about the birds of the Central Plateau of Tasmania and both of these were many years ago. The first, by Col W.V. Legge in 1905, dealt almost solely with Great Lake's waterfowl and shore birds, and the second was an account of the observations made over a period of two months in the spring of 1923 by Miss J.A. Fletcher while she was staying at the Steppes with the pioneer family, the Wilsons.

Three main habitats are included - (1) the lakes and their shores, (2) sub-alpine forests, and (3) highland moors.

The lakes and their shores

The lakes include Great Lake, Arthurs Lakes and the Lagoon of Islands. Woods Lake, Lake Echo, and Lakes Sorell and Crescent are at altitudes of less than 3,000 feet (914 m) although the surrounding country exceeds it, and they have been excluded.

The birds of Great Lake were dealt with in detail by Legge (1905), but it must be remembered that the lake was then in its natural state and it is worth quoting his description of the conditions under which his observations were made.

"The entire lake is remarkably shallow, and its floor extraordinarily level, the variation in the depth of the water, after the downward slope from the shore is passed, being not more than 1 to 2 feet in several miles, and in some localities only 6 inches to a foot in a mile. In many parts this level floor is covered with a remarkable weed of an erect, spinous, and bunchy character, which is torn up by the violent undertow of the waves in a gale of wind in such quantities that the rock-terraced shores are covered with it as marine coasts are with seaweed. How favourable to the habits of diving birds such conditions, when spreading over many thousands of acres of water, are can well be imagined."

It is not surprising that his waterfowl included nearly all of those known in the State whereas few of them can be found there now. In the intervening years the level of the lake has been progressively raised by damming the natural drainage from the lake by the Shannon River at the southern end, so that it is now about 60 feet (18m) deeper. Today the only waterfowl likely to be encountered

on Great Lake are black swan (*Cygnus atratus*), black duck (*Anas superciliosa*), hoary-headed grebe (*Podiceps poliocephalus*) and possibly great crested grebe (*P. cristatus*). Legge referred to an unidentified goose which he suggested might be a pied goose (*Anseranas semipalmata*). There are only three records of this species for Tasmania, all many years old, and two of these were from the Cressy district, a few miles east of Great Lake. Another unconfirmed report, also from Cressy, was received about 12 years ago.

Legge also recorded a caspian tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*) and two unidentified terns in March 1903. These are believed to be the only such records. He mentioned, too, that silver gulls (*Larus novaehollandiae*) were very plentiful at the time of his visit and that a breeding colony had existed on Garden Island near the northern end of the lake. Small numbers still frequent the lake and Arthurs Lakes and isolated breeding still takes place.

Another species which was recorded by Legge as rare is the black cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) which is apparently more numerous now than formerly. It is known to breed in remote tarns on the plateau.

Of the shore birds Legge mentioned only three - golden plover (*Pluvialis dominica*), double-banded dotterel (*Charadrius bicinctus*) and snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*) - and it is believed that the first two of these must be considered rare at the present time. The snipe is known to be still in good numbers about the lakes and across the moors. It is surprising that the spur-winged plover (*Vanellus novaehollandiae*) was not mentioned; although they are not in large numbers they are regularly seen around the shores and Fletcher reported them as plentiful in the Steppes area in 1924. Another species not recorded by Legge was the black-fronted dotterel (*C. melanops*) which was present at Tod's Corner, Great Lake in May 1955.

An increase in the level of Arthurs Lakes has resulted from Hydro-Electric Commission development in 1966 but it is much less than in Great Lake and the conditions have not been so much altered. As a result a wider variety of waterfowl still frequents it. All species of ducks known in Tasmania are likely to be seen there with the probable exception of the freckled duck (*Stictonetta naevosa*) and pink-eared duck (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*), both of which are rare visitors to the State. The black swan is common.

The Lagoon of Islands was dealt with in detail in Fletcher's paper (1924) although waterfowl were not specially featured. This

lagoon is shallow throughout and largely covered with reeds which provide excellent cover. The comments on the waterfowl of Arthurs Lake are equally applicable here, but with the reservation that current Hydro-Electric Commission activity in raising the water level may well modify conditions considerably.

Sub-alpine forests

Miss Fletcher's paper provides broad comments on this habitat and its birds, so that it is unnecessary to list all species here. In broad terms the avifauna is similar to that of dry sclerophyll forests throughout the State, but breeding species may be restricted. Many of the birds seen in this habitat during the summer months descend to lower altitudes in the colder months and may breed there before returning to the plateau.

The following comments are made where Miss Fletcher's notes require special attention. The first of these is her reference to the orange-breasted parrot (*Neophema chrysogaster*) the presence of which "depends on the flowering of the trees", and she made a similar comment about the blue-winged parrot (*N. chrysostoma*). Both these species are seed eaters and not nectar feeders so that their presence is not dependent on flowering eucalypts. The orange-breasted parrot is a rare bird, which in recent years at least has been confined to buttongrass areas of the West Coast. There are earlier records of its presence in other areas inland but many ornithologists do not accept these, believing them to be mis-identifications of the blue-winged parrot.

The forty-spotted pardalote (*Pardalotus quadragintus*) was quoted as not uncommon and Miss Fletcher recorded one pair nesting. This endemic bird was stated to be fairly widespread about fifty years ago but it later became quite rare, so much so that when a nesting pair was found in 1955 on Tasman Peninsula there was great rejoicing throughout Australia. Within the last ten years this species has been found in a number of diverse localities but D.R. Milledge, who has probably a greater knowledge of the species than anyone else, has spent much time in the Steppes area and has not seen it.

Species recorded in this habitat by Milledge (pers. comm.) but not noted by Fletcher are swift parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) and silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*).

Highland moors

These extend for many square miles west of Great Lake and are characterised by low vegetation and innumerable small lakes and tarns.

Except in the shallow valleys of small watercourses there are no trees other than occasional pencil pines on the shores of the tarns. The valley trees are snow gums (*Eucalyptus coccoifera*) with a few hardy shrubs beneath.

In the most recent review of Tasmanian birds, by Ridpath and Moreau (1966), the only species listed as common in this habitat are pipits (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*) and peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*), while the only others listed are flame robin (*Petroica phoenicia*), superb blue wren (*Malurus cyaneus*), black currawong (*Strepera fuliginosa*), raven (*Corvus coronoides*), white-breasted sea eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) and wedge-tailed eagle (*Aquila audax*). This is not an accurate record, being far from complete and not listing the species in relative abundance. The common birds are pipit, black currawong, raven (the Tasmanian species is now recognised as *C. tasmanicus*) and flame robin. Additions to the list of Ridpath and Moreau are - common bronzewing (*Phaps chalcoptera*), green rosella (*Platycercus caledonicus*), brown thornbill (*Acanthiza pusilla*), black-headed honeyeater (*Melithreptus affinis*), strong-billed honeyeater (*M. validirostris*), yellow-throated honeyeater (*Meliphaga flavicollis*), crescent honeyeater (*Phylidonyris pyrrhoptera*), yellow-tipped pardalote (*Pardalotus striatus*), spotted pardalote (*P. punctatus*), brown scrub-wren (*Sericornis frontalis*), blue-winged parrot, yellow wattle-bird (*Anthochaera paradoxa*), black-faced cuckoo-shrike (*Coracina novaehollandiae*), grey shrike-thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*), Tasmanian thornbill (*Acanthiza ewingii*), swamp harrier (*Circus approximans*), brown hawk (*Falco berigora*), welcome swallow (*Hirundo neoxena*), tree martin (*Hylochelidon nigricans*), and silvereye. Some of these are not likely to be seen outside the pockets of scrub in the shallow valleys. Further species have been found in and about the small lakes and tarns on the moors - black duck, black swan, hoary-headed grebe and black cormorant which has been found breeding. About the margins Japanese snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*), spur-winged plover, Tasmanian native hen (*Tribonyx mortierii*), white-faced heron (*Notophyx novaehollandiae*), and white egret (*Egretta alba*) have also been seen.

It is likely that the white egret was a bird on passage between the Mainland of Australia and more suitable habitats in Southern Tasmania, and it is reasonable to assume that other migratory birds cross the moors on infrequent occasions but have not been recorded because of the paucity of observers.

Normal practice up till recent years was for ornithologists to omit any reference to introduced birds in their published papers, but it is now usual for these to be included. Exotic birds known on the Central Plateau include skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) and European

starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) on the moors, and goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) in the sub-alpine forests.

The assistance of the Hydro-Electric Commission in supplying maps and data, and of D.R. Milledge, R.B. Shepherd and D. Ziegeler in making their notes available is gratefully acknowledged.

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