

THE SUNBIRD

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SOME BIRD OBSERVATIONS FROM THE
COOKTOWN DISTRICT

Nancy Hopkins

In July of 1971 I paid a visit to the Cooktown district of north Queensland, spending it mostly at the home of Mr and Mrs (George and Dorothy) Makin at Mt Poverty, in a tin mining area about 30 miles (48.3 km) south of Cooktown and less than 20 miles (32 km) from the coast. Their home is beside a branch of the Normanby River, a deep river fringed with dense forest, including some rain-forest. Adjoining this is comparatively dry and open forest, composed chiefly of *Eucalyptus*, *Acacia* and *Casuarina*. The altitude is near 2000 feet (600 m).

Eight miles (12.9 km) away and considerably lower is Shipton's Flat, behind which towers Mt Finnegan (3740 feet or 1122 m) with extensive rainforests. Most of the birds of Mt Poverty are also found at or near Shipton's Flat, and will be included in a forthcoming account of the birds of that region. I propose here merely to make a few observations on the avifauna. Species mentioned are listed in Appendix I.

Some of the absences are interesting. Presumably because of its height, Mt Poverty lacks some species which occur from Shipton's Flat to Cooktown: the Peaceful Dove, Magpie Lark, Yellow-breasted Sunbird, Yellow Honeyeater, and Great Bowerbird. Furthermore there are no butcher-birds other than the Black Butcher-bird, no crows or magpies, and no Willie Wagtail, but seemingly none of these are numerous.

anywhere in the Cooktown district. Neither the Pied Butcher-bird nor the Black-backed Magpie appears to occur in the coastal areas around Cooktown and Cairns. The Pied Butcher-bird has been recorded on the Lower Stewart River (Thomson, 1935:77), which would be very close to the coast on Princess Charlotte Bay, but in savannah woodlands. I saw neither the Black-backed Magpie nor the Pied Butcher-bird between Mt Poverty and Cooktown, and note that Storr (1953:247) and Wheeler (1967:76) agree in recording the magpie only west of the Normanby River and the Pied Butcher-bird no further east than Helenvale, to the north of Mt Poverty.

The other fantails were all present. A Rufous Fantail camped at night in the trees along the river bank just below the garden. A Grey Fantail arrived in the late afternoon to sing and forage around the back yard before settling for the night in a small tree shading the out-house. In the morning a Northern Fantail took up its position on a wire fence near the back door and foraged nearby for several hours. In both voice and movement this is a quieter bird than the Grey Fantail. It has a pretty little song and its 'chip' call is softer than that of the Grey Fantail. The underparts showed hardly a tinge of buff; some seen in the bush nearby were much more buff but none were as bright as a bird seen in the Northern Territory. From notes received from Mrs Makin, it appears that the Grey and Rufous Fantails are present only during the winter.

The Spectacled Flycatcher was common in the area but the Black-faced Flycatcher which has nested in the garden in summer, was not seen during my stay. I was told that the Spectacled Flycatcher was present throughout the year, but the Black-faced Flycatcher only in summer. If this is correct, where does it winter? Officer (1969:34) states that it is resident in Queensland, though migratory in the southern

states, but Filewood (1971) mentions it as appearing to be "entirely migratory in Papua" and not known to nest there, which implies that it comes from the south. I recorded it frequently at Townsville at the change of season, but have no note of a winter appearance.

In four publications relating to birds of this district I find no reference to the Grey Shrike-Thrush and only one regarding the Yellow Robin which Mack (1953) records as collected at Shipton's Flat and Mt Finnegan. Both are present at Mt Poverty, inhabiting only the region of *Eucalyptus* and *Casuarina*. Along the river are the Pale Yellow Robin and the Rufous Shrike-Thrush, the latter a daily but silent visitor to the garden. The Bower Shrike-Thrush I identified somewhat uncertainly. It is in any case less common.

Birds are attracted to the garden by cumquats, custard apples and chilies (the small, hot, tropical variety) and by a native tree called bleeding heart (*Homolanthus populifolius*). Its clusters of small berries were not ripe but birds (including the Victoria Riflebird) came to investigate them. Riflebirds raided the custard apples which were also favoured by the honeyeaters. A Varied Triller haunted the almost bare chilie bushes. Mrs Makin told me that the Brown Pigeons, which come in flocks when the bleeding heart berries are ripe, also eat the chilies. She said that the rather furtive Spotted Catbird became very bold during the cumquat season. Citrus trees grow nearby on the sites of vanished homes and I was in time for the last of the mandarines. In one tree I found simultaneously a Spotted Catbird and several Lewin Honeyeaters and Macleay Honeyeaters. The Catbird was there daily while the fruit lasted. Brush Turkeys raided the trees by night. The honeyeaters possibly attack only the broken fruit.

We had with us what I call the three 'Lewin' honey-eaters. The Graceful Honeyeater is like a smaller edition of the Lesser Lewin Honeyeater but is a much quieter bird. The Lewin Honeyeater in the tropics, in common with the Eastern Whipbird and some other species found in our south-eastern coastal areas, is found only in the highlands. At Mt Poverty, the Lewin Honeyeater kept to the creek except for forays into orchards, while the other two moved in the open and were constantly around the house.

My final note refers to two cuckoos. I failed to see the Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo but Mrs Makin and I twice saw the Fantailed Cuckoo and often heard what we accepted as its call. Later, Lewis Roberts, a keen observer from Ship-ton's Flat, identified this call as that of the Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo. When questioned he said he was not familiar with the call of the Fantailed Cuckoo which, unlike the other, was only a winter visitor and usually silent during its stay. Whether or not the migrant does keep silent it seems that the two species must have very similar calls.

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APPENDIX I

A list of bird species mentioned in the text arranged alphabetically by their common names.

Bowerbird, Great	<i>Chlamydera nuchalis</i>
Butcher-bird, Black	<i>Cracticus quoyi</i>
Pied	<i>Cracticus nigrogularis</i>
Catbird, Spotted	<i>Ailuroedus melanotis</i>
Cuckoo, Chestnut-breasted	<i>Cacomantis castaneiventris</i>
Fantailed	<i>Cacomantis pyrrhophanus</i>
Dove, Peaceful	<i>Geopelia striata</i>
Fantail, Grey	<i>Rhipidura fuliginosa</i>
Northern	<i>Rhipidura rufiventris</i>
Rufous	<i>Rhipidura rufifrons</i>
Flycatcher, Black-faced	<i>Monarcha melanopsis</i>
Spectacled	<i>Monarcha trivirgata</i>
Honeyeater, Graceful	<i>Meliphaga gracilis</i>
Lesser Lewin	<i>Meliphaga notata</i>
Lewin	<i>Meliphaga lewini</i>
Macleay	<i>Meliphaga macleayana</i>
Yellow	<i>Meliphaga flava</i>
Magpie, Black-backed	<i>Gymnorhina tibescens</i>
Magpie Lark	<i>Grallina cyanoleuca</i>
Pigeon, Brown	<i>Macropygia phasianella</i>
Riflebird, Victoria	<i>Ptiloris victoriae</i>
Robin, Pale Yellow	<i>Eopsaltria capito</i>
Yellow	<i>Eopsaltria australis</i>
Shrike-Thrush, Bower	<i>Colluricincla boweri</i>
Grey	<i>Colluricincla harmonica</i>
Rufous	<i>Colluricincla megarhyncha</i>
Sunbird, Yellow-breasted	<i>Nectarinia jugularis</i>
Triller, Varied	<i>Lalage leucomela</i>
Turkey, Brush	<i>Alectura lathami</i>
Wagtail, Willie	<i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i>
Whipbird, Eastern	<i>Pseudophodes olivaceus</i>

Miss N. HOPKINS, 59 White Street, Wavell Heights, Qld. 4012.

ORIENTAL PRATINCOLES IN SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND

Chris Corben

The Oriental Pratincole, *Glareola pratincola*, is one of two species of the family Glareolidae known from Australia. Whereas the Australian Pratincole, *Stiltia isabella*, is resident in Australia, the Oriental Pratincole is a summer migrant from Africa and southern Eurasia. It is often extremely common in northern Australia but its distribution in the rest of the country is patchy and records are relatively few in number. As far as is known it has not been recorded from south-east Queensland.

On 21 November 1971 Greg Czechura, Greg Roberts and myself were bird-watching around a lagoon near Lowood in the Lockyer Valley west of Brisbane (27°28'S, 152°34'E). The lagoon was roughly oval in shape and about a mile long. Around most of it, grassy paddocks came right down to the water but along one side there were extensive muddy areas. These contained a complex network of water-filled ditches and puddles. The soft mud was not very deep and it was relatively easy to walk across.

While scanning the groups of waders present, I noticed a bird in front of a small mound of mud. The dark colour of its upperparts merged thoroughly with the background, making the bird very difficult to see, although it was quite close. We realised that it was an Oriental Pratincole, and proceeded to approach it carefully. However, it soon took flight, revealing uniform dark upperparts, with a white rump and black, forked tail. It flew a considerable distance and we took some time to reach it again. We flushed the bird again but this time it flew for a short distance only. Soon we noticed other Oriental Pratincoles in the area and a total of twenty-three were counted.

The colour of the upperparts was a dark grey-olive, with the primaries somewhat darker. The rump was pure white

and the tail black. The outer tail-feathers were considerably longer than the rest, giving the tail a peculiar forked appearance. The head and breast were coloured similarly to the upperparts but paled towards the white abdomen and under-tail coverts. The chin and throat colouring varied considerably from bird to bird. Some, probably immatures, had these parts the same colour as the breast. The majority, however, showed a buffy grey colour which seemed to consist of a series of streaks radiating from the chin. The ends of these streaks were black, forming a rough black border to the throat patch. This is presumably the typical non-breeding plumage. One or two birds appeared to be in nuptial dress, with the chin and throat pale buff, sharply bordered by a black line running from eye to eye. In all cases the underwings were dark, with the coverts a beautiful reddish-chestnut. This feature distinguishes the species from the similar Black-winged Pratincole, *G. nordmanni*, which has not been recorded in Australia. The legs were dark grey-brown and the short, heavy bill was generally black, often with a paler, brownish base. There was sometimes a deep, reddish tinge at the extreme base of the bill.

The birds usually stood with the body rather horizontal and low. Occasionally they appeared to squat on the ground. When alarmed they bobbed their heads a few times and assumed a more upright, graceful stance with the neck stretched upwards. Typically they would then walk or run a short distance before flying. In flight they were extremely graceful, with deep, somewhat tern-like wingbeats. Flocks often hawked around at considerable heights, swooping and gliding like swifts. They called frequently, giving either a rich "trooet", like the call of a Golden Plover, *Pluvialis dominica*, or a sharp "trip".

There is little difficulty in distinguishing between the two pratincoles. The Australian Pratincole lacks the distinctive throat pattern of the Oriental Pratincole. The former is a much paler, generally sandy coloured bird, with a broad, brownish-chestnut band across the upper abdomen. The upper wing is buffish, with the primaries a much darker, contrasting brown. The base of the bill is bright red. Young Australian Pratincoles have a duller bill and lack the band across the underparts. They are still much paler than Oriental Pratincoles and, like all of their species, have a far more upright stance and longer legs.

Since the above sighting, the following observations have been made of Oriental Pratincoles at the same lagoon.

- 27 November: Dave Perkins saw 20 birds.
28 November: Several observers saw 27 Oriental Pratincoles which had been flushed by a pair of Spotted Harriers, *Circus assimilis*.
9 December: Dr Dow and myself saw eight birds.
12 December: Dave Perkins saw six birds.
19 December: The three original observers saw two birds.

Mr C. CORBEN, 118 Kennedy Terrace, Red Hill, Queensland 4059.

THE PACIFIC GULL *LARUS PACIFICUS*
IN SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

D.P. Vernon and I.G. Filmer

On 18 August 1971 at 1100 - 1130 hours, one of us (I.G.F.) observed a group of Silver Gulls, *Larus novae-hollandiae* on the estuarine flats of the Noosa River, S.E. Queensland. Attention was drawn by the larger black and white gull in their company and from a distance of approximately 20 metres and for an observation time of about 30 minutes, the bird was identified as a Pacific Gull, *L. pacificus*.

A similar observation was made by Miss S. Bang on the south bank at mouth of the Pine River, Bramble Bay, S.E. Queensland on 18 January 1972. Her observation was of a solitary bird either standing on the sand or hovering above it, in association with several specimens of *L. novaehollandiae*. The observation was made at approximately 30 metres at 1450 - 1500 hours. Miss Bang had made a coloured drawing of the large gull with black tail band and orange tip to the bill. She brought this to the Queensland Museum on 28 January 1972 and when shown a specimen of *L. pacificus* from the study collection she was certain that this was the species observed.

In both cases, the main character in the determination was the presence of a subterminal black tail band on both the dorsal and the ventral surfaces. Similarly, the distal orange-red band on the bill was present, although much paler than illustrated in "A Field Guide to Australian Birds" (Slater 1970).

Agnew (1913) in his paper "The Birds of Peel

Island" stated that *Larus (Gabianus) pacificus* was "rare" for the island. His sightings had not been confirmed by other observers until these present records from S.E. Queensland. The species was not included in "Birds of Brisbane and Environs" (Vernon 1968) nor in a "List of Birds in Queensland" (Lavery 1969) because the validity of the sighting was in doubt.

During 1971 both Jack and Fien observed single specimens of the Dominican Gull, *L. dominicanus* in Queensland. Jack observed a specimen "on the foreshore at Cairns" and Fien photographed and observed a specimen "on a sand bank in the Nerang River at Southport, Q." For further details see Fien (1971) and Jack (1971). In Jack's final paragraph he says "Previous references to the Pacific Gull (*Larus pacificus*) in Queensland could perhaps refer to this species" but we consider that both species, although perhaps rare in Queensland, should now be added to the Queensland list. These two definite records confirm Agnew's earlier sightings of *L. pacificus* for Moreton Bay.

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Mr D.P. VERNON, Queensland Museum, Fortitude Valley, Qld. 4006.
Mr I.G. FILMER, 46 Channon St., Gympie, Qld. 4570.

S H O R T C O M M U N I C A T I O N S

FURTHER NOTES ON COUCALS

The Coucal pair which occupy territory round our home (Sunbird 2:54) are currently in disgrace with our family. The evidence indicates that these Coucals have eaten up the chicks of the Banded Landrails also living in this area.

Early on the morning of 9th November 1971 there was a commotion in the cowyard. A Black-backed Magpie was swooping at a Banded Landrail which was protecting four tiny chicks from these attacks. On our intervention the Magpie left the scene. However, all the squawking and 'ooming' by the birds so intrigued one of the horses that it came to investigate the chicks. The parent Landrail, undaunted, flew at the horse just as we once again arrived on the scene. Then, as a protective measure, we caught the four chicks which were so young that they still were wearing the egg tooth, and put them into the banana patch. Both Landrail parents seemed very upset but soon followed and called the chicks to them.

Next sighting of the Landrail family was on 18 November when there seemed to be only three chicks. On 25 November a second one was missing. At mid-morning on 27 November an adult Landrail was calling in alarm and a chick was squealing in terror. We rushed down but it was too late. The female Coucal had caught the chick and decapitated it. When we arrived, the Coucal was contentedly eating the head whilst the chick's body lay alongside, still twitching. This seemed to explain why the Coucal had been seen stalking the Landrail family on other occasions. We know that Coucals

eat nestlings but were surprised that they would hunt down 18-day old Banded Landrail chicks. At this stage these little fellows are about three-quarters grown and can run with great agility.

The telling of this episode brought the question of why it was stated that the female Coucal was the culprit.

Our arrival disturbed the Coucal in its eating of the Landrail chick so that it flew up into a tree and protested loudly vocally. Its deep voice made it clear that it was the female; the male has a high-pitched voice.

Both sexes are alike in plumage whether this be the breeding or non-breeding dress, but reference books state that the males are always smaller than the females. On occasions we have observed both birds together when they were calling alternately. It was noted then that the larger bird, the female, has a notably deeper voice than the male, which is smaller, and has a higher pitched voice. In the field the size difference is so small that before recording sex we consider it is necessary to see both birds at the same time. However, either voice is clearly sufficient to demonstrate the sex.

Miss ELLA PRATT, Reserve Creek, Murwillumbah, N.S.W. 2484.

NESTING OF NOISY PITTA AT MOUNT GLORIOUS

During the mapping of an eight acre plot in the rainforest as part of a program to study small mammals, the nests of two Noisy Pittas, *Pitta versicolor* were found. Both nests were located between the small buttresses of medium sized canopy trees and contained three and four eggs

on both 6 and 12 December, 1971. Both nests contained young nestlings on 1 January 1972. By 24 January both nests were unoccupied and showing signs of disrepair. However, two new nests were found nearby. One of these contained one egg and the other was still under construction. It is likely that these were the only Noisy Pitta nests on the eight acre plot as the area is well traversed by the author. One question raised by these observations relates to the identity of the nesting birds. Was the second pair of nests constructed by the same group of birds breeding for a second time or did the presence of the first breeders delay nesting of other Noisy Pittas in this area?

The fourth nest was sited against a surface root and fallen palm leaves and not in the usual position between buttresses of large trees. The third and fourth nests were unsuccessful, as they were found on 5 February in a state of disrepair. The fourth nest was not completed and the third had the shell of a single egg two feet in front of the nest entrance; probably destroyed by predation. When these nests were discovered on 24 January an adult bird flew horizontally from each nest as it was approached. Hence it seems possible that the disturbance at this early stage was critical to maintenance of nesting activity, but disturbance after the full clutch was laid (as with the first two nests) did not result in the nests being abandoned.

The nests were not sited facing strictly downhill but the entrances seemed to be orientated so as to allow the maximum clear horizontal flight from the nest. This situation was also implied by Robertson and McGill (1948).

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BLACK FALCON AT CARBROOK

Recently I have been working in the Carbrook district which is an area of open farming country interspersed with patches of *Eucalyptus* and *Melaleuca* forest near Beenleigh, south-east Queensland.

On 7 February 1972 at about 0730 near a large lagoon, I noticed some Domestic Pigeons, *Columba livia* flying as fast as possible towards a large eucalypt into which they crashed in obvious panic. Not far behind them was a falcon in hot pursuit, assisted by a very strong south-easterly wind. Noisy Miners, *Myzantha melanocephala* which were in the same tree, were calling in alarm while the falcon was chasing the pigeons but as soon as it landed in the same tree close to the pigeons the Noisy Miners froze in fright. The falcon sat for a few minutes close to the pigeons and then took off, circled the tree and came back again (with the wind) and tried to flush the intended prey by crashing into the leafy foliage and then clumsily hovering in front of the pigeons. It soon tired of this and directed its flushing activity at some nearby trees, again with no result. Finally it disappeared from sight into a nearby tree.

The bird was identified as a Black Falcon, *Falco subniger* by its uniform darkness and very fast attacking flight assisted by fast, flicking wingbeats. The Black Falcon seldom soared while I was watching it but when it did so it was with flat wings. I am familiar with the Brown Falcon, *Falco berigora* which is quite often seen around my home but which seems to be a more solid bird, has rounded wings which it flaps heavily and soars on upswept wings. While I watched the Black Falcon it uttered no audible call.

Mr PETER DAWSON, Flessner Rd, Logan Reserve via Kingston, Q.4205.

THE OCCURRENCE OF THE YELLOW CHAT
IN SOUTH-WESTERN QUEENSLAND

McGill (1970, Australian Warblers) listed the Yellow Chat, *Epthianura crocea* from five subcoastal districts: Fitzroy River, Kimberley Division, Western Australia, the Victoria and Alligator rivers, Northern Territory, and the Norman and Fitzroy rivers, Queensland.

On 22 January 1972 we collected three Yellow Chats from a party of about ten in a cumbungi (*Typha sp.*) swamp at No. 2 Bore seven miles north of Coorabulka homestead: adult male with enlarged testes, adult female with unshelled egg in oviduct, and subadult female (all three to be deposited in the Queensland Museum, Brisbane). This swamp, set in extensive gibber plains, is formed by an Artesian bore drain. Yellow Chats were heard calling from the *Typha* thickets in adjacent parts of the swamp, and the population seemed to be a fairly large one. The call was a short and attractive one of three notes, the first the highest, the third the lowest.

Later the same day we visited a similar swamp at No. 5 Bore, twenty-seven miles south of Coorabulka homestead, and estimated the population of Yellow Chats there to be about fifty birds. Investigation of other bore drain swamps in western Queensland may reveal further populations of this species.

Mr JULIAN FORD, *Western Australian Institute of Technology,*
Bentley, W.A. 6102.
Mr SHANE PARKER, *44 Mills Street, Clarence Park, S.A. 5034.*

INTERESTING PARENTAL BEHAVIOUR
OF A STRIPED HONEYEATER

The activity of a Striped Honeyeater, *Plectorhyncha lanceolata* in the vicinity of its nest was recorded intermittently over a few hours on the morning of 19 November 1971. The typical hanging basket type of nest was suspended at about seven feet in a small tree near Gatton, south-east Queensland, and contained one well feathered fledgling.

An adult bird was observed making frequent journeys to and from the nest, arriving with some morsel of food which it presented to the fledgling and departing with what appeared to be a packet of faeces.

In the absence of the adult, the young bird made several, initially abortive, attempts to climb out of the nest and, on one occasion, it was entirely out of the nest but retreated immediately the adult returned. Finally it climbed out and continued unsteadily up the branch a few feet. An adult arrived at this point with a small grub and during the next few minutes of continuous observation, it flew to within a foot or so of the fledgling on several occasions, still with the grub in its beak but, without relinquishing it, flew off again to a more distant branch. The response of the fledgling to this seemed to be to attempt to follow the adult by climbing from branch to branch. It was not actually seen to fly.

A little later, after a break in the observations, an adult was seen feeding the fledgling on the same tree but at some distance from the nest.

I will leave the reader to draw such conclusions as he may think justified from these, rather scanty, observations.

Mr N. McKILLIGAN, 4 Stockwell Street, Toowoomba, Qld. 4350.

MIGRATION MOVEMENT DATES
MURWILLUMBAH DISTRICT

Migrants leaving after 1971 winter at Reserve
Creek, near Murwillumbah, northeast N.S.W.:

Yellow-faced Honeyeater ... early August; very few
arrived in area for the
winter.

Rose Robin late August.

Grey Fantail late September; a few
have remained.

Rufous Fantail late September; a few
remained.

Golden Whistler early October.

Species returning to Reserve Creek area for 1971/72
summer:

Leaden Flycatcher 24 August 1971.

Sacred Kingfisher 4 September.

Drongo 9 September; nesting in
usual tree. There were six
other Drongos visiting them
on 29 November but these
were given a hostile
reception.

Koel 18 September

Dollar-bird 19 September.

Brush Cuckoo 25 September.

Cicada-bird 3 October.

Channel-billed Cuckoo 11 October.

Spine-tailed Swift 14 October.

Miss ELLA PRATT, *Reserve Creek, Murwillumbah, N.S.W. 2484.*

BIRD MOVEMENTS IN THE BRISBANE SUBURB OF BELMONT

Species leaving for winter and returning for summer, 1971:

	Departure	Arrival
Channel-billed Cuckoo	8 February	- -
Koel	mid-January	26 September
Brush Cuckoo	6 April	mid-October
Little Bronze-Cuckoo	mid-December	30 August
	(This bird upset the records by calling when it was not thought to be present.)	on 5 July
Sacred Kingfisher	early March	mid-September
Dollar-bird	27 March	19 September
Cicada-bird	3 March	11 October
Leaden Flycatcher	25 April	31 August

Species returning for winter and leaving for summer, 1971:

	Arrival	Departure
Rainbow-bird	18 March	late August
Rose Robin	6 May	mid-August (very few sightings)
Grey Fantail	7 April	18 September
Golden Whistler	early March	late September
Yellow-faced Honeyeater ..	early February	late August
	(2-3 birds only for whole season)	
Eastern Spinebill	29 April	mid-August
	(2 $\frac{1}{2}$ birds for whole season)	

Mrs JOANNA MORGAN, *Eastwood Street, Belmont, Qld. 4153.*
