

The Tasmanian Naturalist

Annual Charge 40 cents

Supplement to the Bulletin of the Tasmanian Field Naturalists' Club
Hobart (Box 68A, G. P. O. Hobart) No. 14, AUGUST, 1968

Registered at G. P. O. Hobart, Tasmania, for post as a periodical

STATUS OF STREPERA QUESTIONED

By Michael Sharland

SYSTEMATISTS in ornithology are seeking to deny Tasmania the possession of two endemic species of *Strepera*, believing that the island has only one, though the status of this one may also be unacceptable.

Tasmania has always been officially credited with two kinds not found beyond state boundaries. And Tasmania, being what it is, unconventional, has always known them as, (1) black jay (*Strepera fuliginosa*) and (2) black magpie (*S. arguta*). The fact that neither is a true jay nor a true magpie is beside the point, for there will always be popular names that are in effect misnomers, implying truth where truth doesn't exist, though nonetheless acceptable if the proper scientific name is used to indicate exact identity.

Some of us have come to use the mainland name, currawong. This name is now generally given to the entire *Strepera* genus. Australia, (including Tasmania,) has six species, grouped in the genus, as well as the family *Streperidae*. The validity of the name "currawong" is open to question, because merely one species, the continental pied *Strepera* (*S. graculina*) has a call that sounds like the word and so has given the vernacular to the rest of the genus whose calls are quite different.

But what else would we call them, as a group? Over the years their names have changed almost as much as a man changes a suit. Magpies, jays, bell-magpies, crow-shrikes, they have had a variety of popular labels, and now currawongs. My own view of the puzzle is that the name, bell-magpie, should be restored as most fitting to the bell-like notes all of them have.

One authority asserts that Tasmania can rightfully claim only a single species as its own. The view is held that the black magpie is nothing but an insular race, or form, of the Australian pied currawong (*graculina*). This despite that there is much less white in the plumage of our black magpie, and there is certainly a marked difference in dialect.

Neither of the Tasmanian *Strepera* utters a call like that of *S. graculina*; but it can be said that our black magpie has a note not unlike that of the continental grey, *Strepera versicolor*.

However, these distinctions apart, Tasmanians are certain to continue accepting them as separate from mainland species until the question is resolved by the Australian Checklist Committee in due course. We already have some 13 or 14 endemic birds, found nowhere beyond Tasmania, and it is likely that local ornithologists will endeavour to see that the list is not assailed. It would be a pity, on our hearing the quaint "clink, clink, clink" call of the black magpie and the equally intriguing "conversational" talk of the black jay, not to be able any longer to say, "That is a Tasmanian bird! "

Casual observers, however, sometimes are unable to differentiate between black jay and black magpie, because the birds look alike. The distinctions are to be found in the amount of white on the body, as well as in the vocal expression of each. In flight, white patches can be seen. In the black magpie the white is in the wings on the tips of flight feathers and on the surface of the wings. Likewise, the under-surface of the tail is white and the tail tips also are white. In the black jay, however, only the wing tips and tail tips are white, though now and then we do see one with small touches of white on the broad part of the wings. The black jay also has the bigger beak.

They are dispersed in Tasmania from coast to mountains, though the black jay is more the mountain-lover, making the crags and high places ring with its loud flock-calls.

WILDLIFE INTRODUCTIONS

EARLY natural history records contain references to attempts by well meaning persons to acclimatise foreign birds and mammals in Tasmania. There were a few failures, as in the case of the tree-sparrow, which disappeared in a few years, and as with the English chaffinch, which didn't settle down at all. But other species of birds became established more or less firmly, and some of these we see about us today.

There was an Acclimatisation Society in Launceston for many years and it brought in a number of birds. Later a similar society was formed in Hobart. Again efforts were made to bring in birds as well as mammals, and some of these were successful, the European rabbit and hare being cases in point. After a while it seems the two bodies became amalgamated to form one State-wide society, and this body also had success in diluting the island's own wildlife with importations from other countries. It brought in partridge, pheasant, and California quail, among other things. Partridge and California quail died out, or were shot out, but the pheasant remained entrenched firmly on King Island, in Bass Strait. And in recent times it has again been liberated in Tasmania and now seems to be well established. In the north-east, for instance, there is a farm at Turners Marsh where sportsmen are offered pheasant shooting, the birds being reared for this purpose. This is the ring-necked species, *Phasianus colchicus*.

Records of the Launceston society mention a number of introductions. The society's report for 1907 states that "about 40 years ago the house sparrow was obtained from Adelaide and is now to be seen in northern parts of the island." It also says the goldfinch was introduced in 1880. It makes reference to the European starling, saying it came to Launceston from Hobart "some years ago," but the report does not indicate who brought it into Tasmania in the first place, though, in another old record, it is mentioned that in 1880 Dr. E. L. Crowther, of Hobart, purchased starlings in New Zealand and liberated 75 around Hobart.

Mr. R. G. Talbot, of Malahide station, Fingal (forbear of Lord Talbot de Malahide, who now owns this historic property) imported skylarks into Tasmania in 1889, liberating them on his station, where today they are well established, as elsewhere in settled parts of the island.

Pheasants, we learn, were introduced some years before this by Thomas Reibey and liberated on his estate, Entally, in the north, and an English gamekeeper was employed to see to them, but the birds were said to have soon disappeared before the gun of the pot-hunter or were killed out by "vermin."

The laughing *hookaburra* was brought in from Victoria (no name is mentioned) and liberated about Launceston and in the north-east, including Waterhouse Island. The date is indicated as about 1906.

MOUNTAINS INSPIRE: Tasmania's mountains, under snow or veiled lightly with mist, have inspired poets and artists alike. Our literature and art galleries have evidence of this. And I was reading the other day how Mt. Ida, on the shores of Lake St. Clair, had actually marked the turning point in a painter's life. W. C. Pignuenit, one of our greatest landscape painters, born in Hobart in 1836, completed a beautiful picture of Mt. Ida in 1876. At that time, before the growth of picture galleries, the taste for art was limited, and few people appreciated Pignuenit's work despite his travels and assiduous efforts to illustrate the beauties of Tasmanian scenery. Thus he became discouraged and lost confidence in himself. And probably we would never have had such a fine variety of his works here, and in New South Wales, had it not been that his picture attracted the eye of Sir James Agnew, a contemporary art patron in Hobart. Agnew bought it for "a very liberal figure", and this put new heart into the artist. Pignuenit admitted later that his "Mt. Ida" launched him on the way to fame.

- M. S.

 THE LATE E. W. CRUICKSHANK

THE death of Ernest Walmsley Cruickshank occurred on 19th June, 1968, ending a close association with our Club extending over 55 years.

He was the third son of Lt. -Col. J. Cruickshank, R. E., born at Maidstone, Kent, England, in 1874. The family lived in India from about 1880 till 1885, when they transferred to Tasmania, Lt. -Col. Cruickshank taking up an appointment with the University of Tasmania when it was founded.

E. W. Cruickshank joined the staff of the Commercial Bank of Tasmania on leaving school, and qualified as an accountant in its service. After some years he resigned to take an appointment as accountant for a tin-mining company at Herberston on the Atherton Tableland of Queensland, and he remained there for several years before returning to Tasmania. He joined the Club in September, 1913, and from the outset took a lively interest in its activities. In addition to attending the Easter Camps, which were a feature of the Club's activities over the years, he made frequent visits to Lake Fenton with other members, including Leonard Rodway, the eminent botanist, and Clive Lord, former secretary, who played a very important part in securing the proclamation of Mount Field National Park.

In 1921 he was appointed accountant to the University of Tasmania, a post he held till his retirement in 1945. At the same time he took a keen interest in the affairs of his church, being treasurer of St. Paul's Church of England at Glenorchy and representing that parish in the Synod of the Diocese of Tasmania for many years. He was also an active member of the Shakespeare Society of Tasmania.

His interest in natural history lay chiefly in the botanical sphere though he was always on the lookout for specimens of spiders and insects which he could pass on to his university colleagues. Nor was his interest limited to his collections and observations; he played a very important part in the administrative affairs of the Club. In 1931 he was elected a vice-president and then president for the years 1933 to 1935. When he stepped down from that position in 1936 he was re-elected vice-president, which office he retained continuously until 1951. He was elected a life member in 1948.

During his term as president a move was made to have a State Floral Emblem adopted, and it was Mr. Cruickshank who campaigned very strongly that the Blue Gum (*E. globulus*) should be chosen. His choice is now officially recognised as Tasmania's State Flower.

His second achievement was the inauguration of annual Wildflower Shows which were the means of drawing public attention to the many beautiful and unique flowers about us. His organising ability was in no small measure responsible for the success of these shows, which continued for many years until the advent of colour photography made the picking of the flowers an unnecessary waste.

In some ways it is strange that through all the years when Mr. Cruickshank was intimately associated with the Field Naturalists Club and the heads of the Natural Sciences departments of the University he never published any of his observations and collections. It is, however, a measure of his retiring nature that he preferred to see others in the limelight, and carried on his own pursuits in that quiet unobtrusive way which we came to know so well.

- L. E. W.

YOUR JOURNAL : The Editor seeks items of interest - notes and short articles on natural history - for publication in "The Tasmanian Naturalist." He reminds you that each quarter he struggles to find enough matter to fill these pages, so please help. There must be items you can send in as the result of Club field outings and your own personal observations at other times. Indicative of either lack of interest or just want of thought is the fact that since the journal first appeared, in May, 1965, less than half a dozen unsolicited items have been received. So please give us what you can, on any aspect of natural history, and particularly on botany, a hitherto rather neglected field. Address them to the Editor, M. Sharland, 127 Bathurst Street, Hobart, Tasmania.

NEW NATIONAL PARK ORGANISATION

IT does not appear that the Tasmanian Premier (Hon. Eric Reece) will be able to honour his undertaking given to the Legislative Council last year that new legislation affecting the control of Tasmania's South-West would be submitted to Parliament before September 30 this year. Parliament went into recess in July and will not meet again until after the stated period has expired. The position is giving concern to the many outdoor organisations which have been actively working for the preservation of the South-West as a wilderness area and the improvement of national parks administration as a whole. Greatest activity in this regard has been with the South-West Committee, set up to safeguard as far as possible the region concerned and on which most of the outdoor bodies are represented in one way or another.

During the debate on the Gordon River Hydro-Electric Bill, giving control of the South-West to the Hydro-Electric Commission while initiating its major power scheme in the region, the Premier informed the Legislative Council in writing of his undertaking. Accordingly, it was expected that the new legislation would be brought down during the Parliamentary session just ended. The Minister in charge of Scenery Preservation (Mr. Cashion) had said that it would. But there was a hitch somewhere, and it is understood that redrafting of the proposed Bill has been necessary.

There has been much speculation, as well as some confusion as to the outcome. Questions being asked are: Will the Scenery Preservation Board be reconstituted or abolished? Will a new establishment for the administration of parks and reserves be created, incorporating the functions of fauna preservation and inland fisheries bodies? These are subjects of interest to our Club, and members are anxious to know the terms of the proposed legislation and determine to what extent, if any, the Club, along with kindred bodies, will be able to assist in the administration of national parks, and in particular the preservation of the wilderness lands of the South-West.

- M. S.

INSECTS AS FOOD: It has been estimated that about one-third of the diet of song birds and game birds is insects. But in some parts of the world insects are also eaten by people. Desert locust is a delicacy in Saudi Arabia, especially when toasted. In Jamaica a plate of crickets is presented only to distinguished guests. Eggs of large aquatic insects are sold in city markets in Mexico, while in the U. S. A. some imported canned cerambycid worms, chocolate-covered ants, and French fried grasshoppers are occasionally found on sale at supermarkets. And in Australia the aborigine enjoys a dish of the larvae of wood-boring beetles, known as "witchetty grubs." Then, of course, we eat the products of insects, honey particularly. Likewise, we use shellac, cochineal, wax (in cold creams), and silk, all of which come from insects. So they form quite a useful segment of the animal kingdom.

- M. S.

CAMP EQUIPMENT TO BE SOLD: The Club proposes to sell by public auction its comprehensive camping equipment, comprising about 20 good tents, three marquees, and all cooking gear and other items, capable of catering for up to 75 persons. The big field camps under canvas at Easter time have now been discontinued in favour of the increasing practice of members to camp and cater for themselves in separate family parties. An announcement regarding the auction will be published in due course. The equipment was advertised for sale by private tender at \$1,000, but no favourable offers were received.

TASMANIAN FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

Principal office bearers

- President: Mrs. T. L. Stephens, 11 Hazel Street, Blackman's Bay. 7152.
- Secretary: Mr. G. A. Major, The Embers, 23 Riverview Pde, Rosetta. 7010
- Treasurer: Mr. L. E. Wall, 63 Elphinstone Rd., North Hobart. 7000