

# The Tasmanian Naturalist

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## STRAY RECORDS FROM NORTH-EAST COAST

TWO species of birds - white-throated treecreeper and tailor-bird - have been recorded in the district known as the North-East, but each only once, and that a long time ago. They have not been seen since, in the North-East or elsewhere on the Tasmanian mainland.

Why they have not been seen, or recorded if seen, since being first reported is something of a puzzle. Probably there aren't enough bird-observers interested in searching for them, or casual observers sufficiently alert to the need to report them. But our eyes and ears should always be attuned to the sight or sound of either whenever we travel through this part of Tasmania, which extends from the Tamar estuary eastwards to St. Helens on the coast.

A little while ago I spent two days in the Springfield district looking for one of them - the tailor-bird (*Cisticola exilis*.) My search was unsuccessful. Museums have no specimens to confirm its appearance in Tasmania, though Max McGarvie reports it as a common species on King Island, off the north-west coast.

"What's hit is history; what's missed is mystery," is a museum maxim. This has some justification, though its application is not quite so important today when experienced field men are having reports of new bird sightings accepted as authentic, especially when they are confirmed by fellow observers competent to recognise the species concerned.

It is a long time ago when the birds were first reported. Some time before 1910, in which year he published the record, F. M. Littler, a Launceston ornithologist, reported seeing the white-throated treecreeper "in the big forests in the north-east of the island." Distinctive enough, in pattern and voice and feeding habits, the treecreeper could hardly have been mistaken for anything else, though it has not been reported since Littler's day. It is a common species in the eastern part of the Australian continent, and comes close to the coast in Victoria.

So far as not mistaking it for anything else, I mean that Littler, if a good observer, would not have confused it with any Tasmanian bird; but as his was purely a visual observation he had no proof that it wasn't a different species of treecreeper, the red-browed, which resembles rather closely the white-throated and likewise occurs close to the coast of Victoria.

There is thus some element of doubt about its exact identity, but generally we accept it as being what he said.

Jane Ada Fletcher, a foremost bird-observer of her time, recorded the presence and breeding of the tailor-bird at South Springfield in 1911. In my possession are her original letters written to the late A. L. Butler, in which she describes the bird and its nest and eggs. A. H. Chisholm has examined her descriptions and though these vary somewhat from what is known of nesting sites in other States, he has no doubt that the species seen by J. A. Fletcher was in fact the *Cisticola*.

Apart from King Island, South Springfield is the only place where it has been recorded in Tasmania - and it does not appear to be there today. The district has been opened up, is being farmed, and much of the marshland has been lost. In both Victoria and New South Wales the tailor-bird favours marshland in preference to other types of country, though in Queensland the bird is known to nest in vegetable patches and other kinds of cultivated plants. Miss Fletcher's early days were spent in Queensland and so she got to know the little bird rather well. And Chisholm is a leading authority on the species, which gets its popular name from the practice of stitching leaves to its nest.

It is rather odd that these two species should have been reported from the North-East only. One would think that if they occurred in that district they would also have been found in the northern parts of the State as well. Their history should stimulate further search by the keen birdman.

It is likely that if the tailor-bird should turn up again it will be found in the far North-West, to where any day it may decide to "hop" from its present Tasmanian stronghold on King Island, out in Bass Strait.

Until fairly recently, the North-East was further interesting in being the only Tasmanian locality the continental fairy martin had been proved to visit. Its bottle-shaped mud nests clustered on a coastal rock, with birds in them, were found near Bridport in 1883. However, since then at least one pair of fairy martins has visited Tasmania, as proved by the finding of the remains of a nest attached to the roof of a small cave on the Ballochmyle estate, close to the Midland town of Tunbridge. This was in April, 1967. No birds were seen about the nest or elsewhere, but it was identified as a fairy martin's nest by Roger Vincent, ornithologist, living at Oatlands, and by Leonard Wall, who inspected it later.

Anyone finding mud nests of the kind, shaped roughly like bottles and with little tunnels of mud leading to them, usually glued to a rock face or beneath a bridge, should report the finding to a museum or some ornithological authority.

The fairy martin has some fine distinctions separating it from our common tree-martin, mainly in flight actions and head colour, and thus could easily be mistaken for the tree-martin.

- THE EDITOR.

**ANOTHER MEMBER PASSES :** At the October meeting of the Club the president (Mrs. T. L. Stephens) referred to the death of Mr. Doug. Gilbert, one of the Club's oldest members. His association with the T. F. N. C. began many years ago, when he was an officer in the Lands and Surveys Department. For a long period he seldom missed attending a meeting or a field outing and was always a keen naturalist and lover of the outdoors. As a tribute to him, members stood for a few moments in silence.

**A LOST REEF?** Writes an old prospector in his diary about his search for gold on Flinders Island some 60 years ago. - "Down an incline I saw an outcrop of stone -- not exactly quartz. I knocked off a bit with my hammer. It looked interesting and I put it in my vest pocket. Being dog tired from a long day's walk I took it out on reaching my shanty, put it on a shelf and thought no more about it. Months passed, and one day, while showing my various samples to a visitor, I picked it up and looked at it closely through a magnifying glass. There was gold all through it! Next morning I was up before daybreak, and made straight for the place where I found it, hoping it would lead me to a reef. But there was no outcrop, the slope of the hill was not exactly the same to me, and I have not been able to locate it since."

**THE WILDERNESS :** When the first European settlers landed on Tasmania's coast, something came down from the shore to meet them. It marched proudly; until then it had been invincible. The newcomers called it the wilderness, and they took it to be their foe. They had come with the gun and the plough, with sheep and horses, with ambition and magnificent dreams. The species Man had long had its place in this life, a part of it, keeping the age-old balance. The black man never dammed a stream, never drained a swamp, never exterminated an animal. In no way did he break the charmed circle of the wildlife community. And because he did not do these things, or had not done them, he was exterminated by the white man. (Adapted from "The Road of a Naturalist" by Donald Culross Peattie, 1948).

**SMALL BUT SIGNIFICANT :** Sometimes it needs only a small thing to prove something big. *Micraspides*, a freshwater shrimp, only 3/8 in. long, as fine as the finest silk, and so nearly transparent that its presence is betrayed only by its shadow, is said to prove that South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand were once connected by land. It may yet confirm proof that South America was once also connected to Australia -- and, of course, Tasmania to the rest of Australia. *Micraspides*, living in Tasmanian western bog waters, and a very primitive form of life, also lives in South Africa and New Zealand, and only in fresh water. In time it is expected to be found in South America.

### NATURALISTS' OBSERVATIONS

THE time devoted to "observations" at Club monthly meetings is always an interesting period and useful information sometimes comes to light from members in several natural history fields. Here are some observations extracted from the Club minute book for the past few months.

Mr. David Zeigler reported some 60 spine-tailed swifts flying over West Hobart in mid-March.

Mr. D. Milledge : A pair of 40-spotted pardalotes breeding at Tinderbox on March 16.

Mr. Hurburgh exhibited a big juvenile leaf of the blue gum collected on the southern face of Mt. Nelson. The leaf was 6 in. by 4 in. in size.

Mrs. Thorpe reported that during Easter five pink and grey birds were seen on the George Town Road, probably galah cockatoos.

Mr. Zeigler, at the April meeting, reported the sighting of an albino stag and doe on a farm at Lemont - fallow deer?

Mr. Hurburgh sought information about an Ornithological Society functioning in Tasmania about 1850, as described in a copy of the "Readers' Digest". No information was forthcoming. ( This was probably an acclimatisation society -- Ed. )

At the June meeting Mr. Thomas reported having seen four greenshank at Windermere lagoon.

Mr. Boss-Walker reported at the July meeting that, as some compensation for his no longer having strong-billed honeyeaters about his home, formerly at Fern Tree, his Sandy Bay home was attracting other birds, including both the little wattlebird and yellow wattlebird and crescent and yellow-throated honeyeaters.

Mr. Zeigler reported a Tasmanian masked owl at upper Liverpool Street, Hobart, and on July 11 he had seen a yellow-tipped pardalote at Knocklofty.

Mr. Wall reported to the August meeting he had seen a spotted owl lift a dead turtle dove from the pavement of Fitzroy Place, Hobart, and lift it over a 5ft. wall. He also saw a swift parrot - the first for the season - on August 10 and a fantail cuckoo on August 15.

Mrs. Luckman referred to factual errors in the review of a book, "Water Animals and their Young", and presumably in the book. One statement was that the platypus swam along the seabed after crayfish!

At the October meeting Mr. Sharland reported, as a matter of interest, seeing five or six swift parrots in the Windsor district of New South Wales on October 13, and, the same day in a Sydney suburb, one yellow-tipped pardalote (both Tasmanian breeding species). He thought they were laggards still on their way back to Tasmania.

**WHAT WE MISSED!** The United States' Yellowstone National park is famous for its geysers and kindred graphic phenomena, attracting many thousands of visitors. If Tasmanians had lived 430 million years ago they would have seen much the same kind of thing, perhaps on larger scale, in the present area about Mt. Farrell, near Tullah, on the West Coast. Our geologists believe this to have been one of the most spectacular areas for geysers and volcanoes known in Tasmania. Pity we were not there to admire it!

**ROBINS ASSEMBLE :** Tasmania has four kinds of robins, flame, scarlet, pink and dusky, the lastnamed being confined to the island. It is perhaps unusual to see all four feeding together, but this was what I was favoured with at the small picnic area at Hellyer River, on the West Coast, in April. The four species were at the picnic ground and made a delightful picture in the little clearing among beeches and eucalypts.

- THE EDITOR.

Notes for publication should be sent to - M. Sharland, 1 Erina Place, Hobart.

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### PROTECTING THE CAPE BARREN GOOSE

FURTHER conservation measures have been taken with the object of preserving the Cape Barren goose (*Cereopsis novae-hollandiae*). Goose Island, in Bass Strait, the breeding territory of this interesting species, has been made a sanctuary, and, in addition, a number of birds have been transferred to Maria Island, off the east coast, which also has been made a faunal reserve.

It is hoped the goose will settle down and breed on Maria Island, which will be patrolled by a permanent ranger employed by the Animals and Birds Protection Board.

Australia has only two large species of geese, although there are three duck-sized ones. The breeding grounds of the large ones - magpie and Cape Barren - are virtually separated by the depth of the continent. The magpie goose (also called pied and semi-palmated) breeds in the north, the Cape Barren goose in the south. Stronghold of the Cape Barren goose is undoubtedly the Furneaux Group of islands in Bass Strait, between Tasmania and Victoria.

An agitation by ornithologists and naturalists to obtain better protection for the Cape Barren goose, once a diminishing species, seems now to have given rise to positive official action, which is appreciated.

### SCHOUTEN ISLAND NOW A SCENIC RESERVE

SCHOUTEN ISLAND has been proclaimed a scenic reserve. Few people are familiar with it, so here are some facts concerning it :-

It is approximately 11 square miles in area and lies one mile from the southern tip of Freycinet Peninsula opposite Swansea, on the East Coast. It is 12 miles from Coles Bay and 15 miles east of Swansea on the opposite side of Oyster Bay. The terrain is scrubby and very rough; most of the eastern part of the island consists of granite, the western side of dolerite, with cliffs of sandstone. Highest point is Mt. Story, some 1,800 ft. to the summit from water level. Mt. Story gets its name from Dr. Story, an early medico and member of a Quaker community on the East Coast.

Extensive kitchen middens indicate that the first inhabitants were Tasmanian aborigines, now all extinct. Coal deposits were worked there many years ago, and silver also was mined. A number of Chinese people worked the silver.

Schouten Island features in the stories of Tasmania's early bay-whaling industry. Lookouts were kept on its high crags and signalled the arrival of whales. Crews then rowed out in boats and harpooned the whales.

There was one outstanding whaling leader named Mason. While watching for whales Mason slipped over a cliff into the sea and was killed. The cliff where he fell is known today as "Mason's Downfall."

Intersecting the island, north to south, is a singular geological fault. It can be traced throughout its course, and separates clearly the granite formation from the dolerite formation. The terrain of the island is quite distinct and different on each formation.

No one lives on the island now. A house and a woolshed stand near the anchorage on the northern edge and the island has been leased for grazing sheep.

Such stones and metals as zircon, garnet, quartz, topaz, tin, rutile and tourmaline have been taken as samples from the island in recent times. There is one small beach, and sand from this has yielded some rutile.

### TASMANIAN FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

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