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WADING BIRDS OF THE TAMAR ESTUARY

by L. E. Wall

(The writer believes that each side of the Tamar River estuary, in parts less than a mile across, has its own wader colonies with little or no interchange between them, which shows how parochial these birds may be. Ed.)

SINCE the study of waders first took my attention twenty years ago I have often wondered what the extensive tidal flats on both sides of the Tamar Estuary harboured, but until recently I have not made a special effort to gather information. Over the years I have made several brief visits to George Town and Low Head on the eastern side of the estuary but it has not been convenient to spend time searching the mud-flats and adjacent shores. On one of these visits (27 March 1960) a number of waders, including some migrants, were seen at a distance and included two believed to be tattlers, then considered to be rare in Tasmania.

A year later (12 March 1961) I visited the western shore of the estuary between Kelso and Greens Beach where I found seven migratory species and five residents. The habitat here is quite different from that in the favourite wader grounds in the south of the State but obviously very suitable for a number of species. R. H. Green, of the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, has a weekend cottage in this locality and from his experience the birds I recorded on that visit would be a normal population.

During the weekend of 16/17 November 1968 I was able to spend a day and a half investigating the tidal flats of the Tamar mouth, and now that the Batman Bridge spans the river at Whirlpool Reach, a few miles upstream, it is easy to visit both sides on the same tide.

On 16 November I reached George Town about 2 p. m. The tide was receding and I searched the shore northward from the town area. On the northern edge of the town extensive basaltic reefs with small patches of sand lie exposed at low tide, and about a mile further north, towards Low Head, fairly extensive sand-flats are interspersed with smaller reefs. A few birds were scattered over the reefs and larger numbers on the exposed flats, but no waders were found in the immediate vicinity of Low Head.

In the late afternoon I drove to the west side of the estuary, arriving at Kelso at 5 p. m. The tide was then rising. The only waders seen in this vicinity were 20 red-necked stints and a few red-capped dotterels, pied and sooty oystercatchers and spur-winged plovers, a much reduced list from that obtained in 1961. However, on the earlier occasion almost the whole area from Greens Beach to Kelso was searched, while this time the search was restricted to within a mile of Kelso. About 7 p. m. two small waders were seen across the water heading towards Greens Beach; they may have crossed the river from the George Town side but this is doubtful.

The following morning I re-visited the eastern shore between George Town and Low Head when the tide was high and just starting to ebb. All the sand-flats and most of the reefs were covered by the tide but the highest parts of some reefs remained exposed and many waders were resting on them. As the flats were exposed the birds dispersed widely over them but I did not see any moving in from other areas. So I feel sure this population is self-contained.

Having watched these birds spread out across the flats feeding, I returned to Kelso on the western shore, as I had done the previous day. Here I carried out a search of the rocks and sand now fully exposed at low tide, but this time I searched almost as far as Greens Beach. The birds seen were very similar to those of my 1961

visit. Most were found nearer to Greens Beach than the area covered on the previous day.

The results of the two main counts on each side of the estuary are detailed in the accompanying table and demonstrate the constancy of the populations as a whole. Some minor variations are discussed below, but they do not seem inconsistent with my belief that the two populations are quite distinct, with little or no interchange between them.

The search of the eastern side (George Town) on 17 November did not cover the reefs close to the town where the majority of the curlews and godwits had been found the previous day. It seems that the knots seen on the 17th had been mistaken for tattlers on the 16th. On both days gale-force winds were blowing, making it most difficult to hold the binoculars steady, and the birds were at a considerable distance when counted on the 16th, but the knots were seen clearly at close quarters the next day.

The major variations in the counts on the western shore (Kelso) were in the numbers of red-necked stints, and in the absence of double-banded dotterels on 17 November, 1968. It must be remembered, of course, that the dotterels would normally be in New Zealand during the spring months. As for the stints, because of the heavy winds it would have been very easy to miss a flock of the birds sheltering among the rocks.

F. M. Littler, in his "Birds of Tasmania and its Dependencies" (1910), mentions only five migrant waders in the Tamar — eastern golden plover, eastern curlew, greenshank, sharp-tailed sandpiper and double-banded dotterel. He quoted the greenshank as being very irregular in its appearances, and the sharp-tailed sandpiper as apparently an isolated occurrence in the vicinity of Launceston. It seems inconceivable that none of the other migrants now regarded as regular visitors should have been unknown there fifty or so years ago. It is hoped that further observations of the area will be possible to confirm the conclusions I have suggested here.

SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS

	George Town & Low Head		Kelso & Greens Beach	
	<u>16/11/68</u>	<u>17/11/68</u>	<u>12/3/61</u>	<u>17/11/68</u>
Double-banded dotterel			60	
Hooded dotterel			7	
Pied oystercatcher	p	p	p	p
Sooty oystercatcher	p	p	p	p
Red-capped dotterel	p			p
Spur-winged plover	p		p	
Eastern golden plover	8		15	3
Eastern curlew	54	21	9	3
Bar-tailed godwit	28		2	7
Greenshank	6	10		
Tattler (grey-tailed?)	11	9		
Lesser knot		2		
Turnstone	45	30	25	42
Curlew sandpiper	200?	33	4	2
Red-necked stint	100?	100?	60	4

"p" indicates that the species was present but not counted.

SNAKE EATS WATTLEBIRD: This report comes from Coles Bay, on the East Coast. In a low bushy tree at Coles Bay a few weeks ago a holiday-maker saw a snake. This, he thought, was most unusual because he did not think snakes could climb trees. More unusual, however, was what he saw the snake to be doing. It was in the process of swallowing a fairly large young brush wattlebird. It had evidently snatched the bird from a nest or had "mesmerised" it when it landed in the tree. It was said to be a "black" snake.

DR. E. A. ELLIOTT, CLUB'S FIRST SECRETARY

SINCE our last issue the death took place of Dr. Edmund Alfred Elliott, one of the Club's founders and its first hon. secretary. Dr. Elliott was born at Hobart on 12 September 1884, and he died at Latrobe on 10 November 1968. He had been a very keen bird-observer and was probably the first man in Tasmania to take photographs of wild birds. He was also a good general naturalist and helped to establish the Club in 1904 and guide it along during the following years. He was always a lover of the outdoors and was chiefly responsible for organising Club camps and field outings in the early years.

Dr. E. A. Elliott had a medical career of some distinction. Educated at The Friends School, Hobart, he matriculated while working part-time with the Agricultural Department. He studied at Sydney University in 1913, graduated in 1918, studied at the Brisbane Hospital (where he met his future wife, Doris Merchant - they were married in 1918) and afterwards was in charge at the North Shore Hospital, Sydney. Returning to Hobart shortly before the end of the First World War he joined the Army Medical Corps. After the war, over some 30 years he built up an extensive private practice in Hobart. During this period he served as hon. anaesthetist at Stowell Hospital, hon. physician to the Tasmanian Chest Hospital, and undertook additional work for the Salvation Army, Kennerley Boys Home, and medical lodges. He was the first to introduce electro-therapy in Tasmania.

In 1948 he sought to retire from medicine and began growing walnuts on Bruny Island, but it wasn't long before he was asked to be Government medical officer for the island, a position which kept him busy until a fire destroyed his house and all contents, including diaries and records, about 1958. Then he moved to Railton, and a year later commenced a medical practice at East Devonport where he retired a few years before his death.

CLUB'S ACTIVITY DURING 1968

AN outline of the Club's activity during the past year is contained in this synopsis of the annual report of the President (Mrs. Thora L. Stephens); to be read at the annual meeting on February 20. -

The Easter camp held at Maria Island proved immensely popular and was well attended. Mr. H. Lourandos, archaeologist, and Mr. A. Dartnell, invertebrate zoologist, who camped with us made excursions and discussions more informative. Field outings in 1968 were generally well supported. Some excellent illustrated talks were given at Club meetings.

The Club's representatives on the South-West Committee and Tasmanian Fauna and Flora Conservation Committee have kept us well informed; many controversial issues emerged and the Club's influence was used to good effect. Mr. D. Milledge and Mr. D. Thomas attended the annual meeting of the Federation of Field Naturalists Clubs in March.

This year the book prize for a written exercise on a natural history subject was won by Master Nigel Brothers. Death removed two life members, Dr. E. A. Elliott and Mr. E. W. Cruickshank, and another who had a long Club association, Mr. D. Guilbert. Twelve members were elected during the year. The general committee has met five times and the conscientious interest of its members has helped greatly in making decisions. My thanks are due to the committee and to individual members for their loyalty and help.

The year culminated in the sale of the Club's camping equipment, it being generally agreed that this was the best action to take as the gear was no longer used. The auction proved quite successful. We are deeply indebted to Mr. Harold Sargison and his small band of helpers for housing and caring for the camp gear over many years.

The "Tasmanian Naturalist", published regularly, afforded a great deal of interest and pleasure - we could show our appreciation by supplying more items for the magazine.

MAGPIE SURVEY UNDER WAY IN TASMANIA

CONCERN for the status of the white-backed magpie in Tasmania has prompted two conservation bodies to initiate a survey of population trends, and the factors which are influencing any such trends, the purpose, of course, being to determine whether the species is actually diminishing or is maintaining its numbers throughout the State.

The bodies promoting the survey are the Tasmanian Conservation Trust and the Tasmanian Fauna and Flora Conservation Committee. Persons are being asked to help in the survey by answering several questions of a specific nature which have been sent to them. And since the magpie is a popular bird, one that can be recognised without any doubt, and quite prominent as an open-country species, it is an easy bird to work on for a survey.

Publicity in the press already has been given the survey, this indicating that various factors should be taken into account by those invited to supply information. These include such things as changes in farming methods, increase or decrease of habitat, changes in the bird's habits, the effect of pesticides, road deaths, bush fires, disease, increase in irresponsible shooting, and so forth. The promoters hope to receive a wide response.

Club members also are asked to assist. The fact that some have reported what they believe to be a serious decline in magpie numbers through settled parts of the State during recent times warrants the help of every bird-lover. Mr. David Thomas, 9 Lallaby Road, Moonah, Tasmania 7009, will supply copies of the questionnaire to anybody who wishes to co-operate, and he also will receive replies and organise the compilation of results.

So please rally round and help in what may be a very useful undertaking.

RANGER ON MARIA ISLAND: Mr. Rex Gatenby has been appointed the Animals and Birds Protection Board's wildlife ranger for Maria Is. off the Tasmanian east coast, where a fauna reserve has been established. Mr. Gatenby, in addition to his patrol duties, will improve and maintain old buildings left over from the former penal station at Darlington and elsewhere on the island. As well as this, and the preservation of nature trails and landmarks, he will maintain a small meteorological station, meet and guide school parties, youth clubs and tourists, and assist visiting scientists. The Board has established a 75-acre enclosure near Darlington, where visitors will be able to view and photograph certain animals in a semi-wild state. It is planning to obtain a type of emu from the Australian mainland which in colour and other characteristics may resemble the Tasmanian form of emu, long ago extinct. If a pair of the special colour variety, the short-legged kind, can be procured it may be possible to establish the species on the island.

NOT ALWAYS MOUNT WELLINGTON: Mt. Wellington rises for more than 4,000 feet above Hobart, a magnificent mountain, with a motor road to the summit, from which spot nearly half of the island of Tasmania can be seen. It not always went by the name of Mt. Wellington, however. Here, for instance, are some of the other names it carried, extracted from official records — UNGANYALETTA, from the aborigines; MONTAGNE du PLATEAU, by Williamez, an officer with Bruny D'Entrecasteaux, 1793; SKIDDAW, by Capt. J. Hayes, after Skiddaw, in Cumberland, England; MT. TABLE, by Matthew Flinders, 1798; TABLE MOUNTAIN, known as such generally for a long period; MT. COLLINS, 1820, after Governor Collins; and then came MT. WELLINGTON, 1824, after the Duke of Wellington. As for those who have climbed it — fewer these days with the road — the first woman to make the ascent was Lady Franklin, wife of Sir John Franklin, Tasmania's Governor, 1837-43.

COCKATOOS AND BAD WEATHER: Three black cockatoos flew low over housetops near the Sandy Bay shopping centre at 5 o'clock one afternoon early in January. Omens of bad weather? Whether this impression is correct or not, that black cockatoos in the city indicate adverse weather, it was a fact that wind and rain followed their appearance a few hours later and continued for most of the night. Next morning, with the cockatoos gone back to the bush, the sun shone from a clear sky.