

LATE EDGAR F. STEAD.

AN APPRECIATION.—By Major R. A. Wilson, Bulls.

Edgar Stead is dead.* I have lost a great friend and will miss him profoundly. For forty years, whenever he had proposed a trip to study some special bird, I have recast my plans and accompanied him. It might be a motor trip up to a week or ten days to the Goulund Downs for kiwis, North Canterbury for sparrow hawks, Arthur's Pass for rock wrens, Westland for the black petrel, Lake Heron for black teal or the Hollyford Valley for kakas, for instance—or it might be a trip to an offshore island seeking some petrel, taking up to six weeks. Besides the pleasure and interest I got out of the trips I felt that if I helped to find a new species, or helped to record a new fact or habit of some possibly vanishing bird, I had accomplished something of more enduring value than if I had attended to my own more mundane matters.

His death is a great loss to ornithology. Had he lived it was his intention to carry on with his life histories of New Zealand birds until he had completed most of our indigenous species. This he estimated would take two more volumes of similar size to his published work. He had collected facts and taken many photographs for the purpose. When on our trips he always recorded every evening voluminous notes on birds we had observed during the day with particulars as to time and place. His diaries and notes and photographs are there but the collating and arranging of them is a task that only he, with his wonderful memory, could adequately fulfil. Though he has published a lot of articles in the Transactions and other publications, a great deal of his knowledge is lost for ever.

As a young man he was inclined to be positive and over-bearing but with age and marriage he mellowed, and on our trips he was a wonderful companion with great consideration for others. To the end, however, he remained outspoken and never learned to suffer fools gladly.

He had a wonderful brain and a marvellous photographic memory. Once we landed on one of the group of the Chickens Islands and he said as we landed: "I landed here seventeen years ago and there was a *carneipes* colony nesting on the bank by the landing place," and there was the colony of breeding birds just as he remembered it. We advanced into the bush and he said: "Up the stream about 200 yards was a tree with a morepork's nest in it." We went about that distance and there was the tree with a morepork sitting on her nest. As good nesting places are scarce on these islands no doubt it had been occupied each year since his visit.

He was trained as an electrical engineer and was finishing his course at Schenectady, in America, with the General Electric Company, when his father's death recalled him just before he obtained his degree, but he always retained a great grasp of engineering problems. As showing his mechanical skill, on one of our trips when the mainspring of our alarm clock broke, with only a knife as a screwdriver, he took the clock to pieces, took out the broken spring, softened the end by heating it over our benzine mantle lamp, cut another hole with his knife in the end of the spring, refitted it in the clock, put it all together again, and it ran perfectly for many years afterwards. Another time, visiting a house where the motor mower would not function, he took the motor to pieces and timed the magneto correctly and got it going again in an hour or so. He was a master of so many subjects that trips with him were never dull. One could always have interesting conversation on any subject that came up.

His patience in photographing birds was extraordinary. One day on an island off Stewart Island we found a wren's nest in a hollow log

* Mr. Stead's death occurred at his residence "Ilam," Christchurch, on February 7, 1949.—Ed.

in which the entrance was directly underneath, so that the birds could enter the nest without exposing themselves. Edgar took the whole day with his camera trained on a spot close to the entrance trying to photograph them as they fed the young, well hidden, of course, inside the log. He blocked in turn each entrance they were using but they obstinately refused to use the only one he could photograph but found some other route out of sight. I got tired of waiting, so after an hour or two I went exploring. On my return he was still patiently waiting for an exposure. I again waited for some time but finally returned to camp, but after my departure he eventually got a successful exposure.

He had an uncanny ability for finding nests. On Cundy Island, where the fern birds nested deep in ferns or tussock (owing to danger of damage from mutton birds descending at night), they were very difficult to find. He found 26 where I found one. With other birds whose nests were hard to find, like robin's, saddle-back's or tomtit's, he generally found three to my one. He seemed to be able to put himself into the mind of a bird choosing a nesting site. On our latest trip to the Snares there was a hole in an olearia tree a few yards from our tent that he considered could be made a suitable site for a nest of the black tomtit of that island. It was too open, so he improved it by tacking a piece of tin on one side. Within a few hours a pair of tomtits had inspected it and commenced to build and before we left ten days later the hen had laid the clutch of two eggs. On other islands he did the same. By improving a hole in a tree on Solomon Island a pair of saddlebacks immediately occupied it as a nest. By enlarging an entrance of a hole in a tree on Jacques Lees Island a pair of yellow-head parakeets nested in it. He had a deep knowledge of nests of all birds both indigenous and imported and knew at one glance what bird any nest belonged to. Any feather one picked up he could place with unerring accuracy.

His work in hybridising rhododendrons and growing seedling azaleas is well-known and his garden at "Ilam" is the mecca of rhododendron growers. He was proud of a fine yellow rhododendron he had produced after many years, and was feeling his way more surely in crossing species and hybrids. In hybridising, his long supple fingers were adept at the delicate operation of extracting the pollen from the male parent, cutting off all the anthers of the flower selected for pollination, placing the pollen on the stigma of the flower so selected, and attaching a label giving the parentage. When he was visiting rhododendron growers in England they greatly admired his skill and got him to make many crosses for them. I used to think when I saw him at work like this what a good surgeon he would have made.

I think he considered his rhododendron work as important as his bird histories. I conclude with a sentence of a letter from a friend: "He was a unique personality and we will all miss him."

BIRD LIFE ON HALKETT POND.—In the May holidays, 1948, a blue heron, or more correctly, a white-faced heron (*Notophyx novae-hollandiae*) appeared on my uncle's pond at Halkett, 16 miles north-west of Christchurch. It stayed all winter. We can see its footmarks in the mud. It has four toes which are not webbed. The heron is a slatey grey colour with a white breast; its legs and beak are yellow. Its neck is as thick as my arm. If it is going a short distance, its neck is out. When I visit it it goes to a post and puts its neck, head, and bill up. It roosts in the top of Uncle Charlie's pine trees. Now there are four pied stilts and two wild ducks at the pond, too. In the second week of September the heron went away and has not been seen since. —Heather McKay, Std. 3, Halkett School Group.