

AUSTRALIAN PELICANS IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS AND NEW HEBRIDES.

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Shortly after arriving at Aneityum (the southernmost island of the New Hebrides, 169° 47' E., 20° 12' S.) on August 4, 1952, it was heard that some large white birds quite strange to the local natives had recently appeared there. An Aneityumese had shot one of these birds at Anelgauhat, the harbour on the south coast of the island, two days previously. This man was located, and on being asked for details he said that although the bird had been eaten its skin was still near his hut.

The remains proved to consist of the vertebral column, legs, tail, and parts of the wings and head of a pelican. Wing quills, scapulars and some of the tail coverts were brown, as much as remained of the rest of the plumage being white. The sides of the bill were bluish, while the dorsal surface and pouch were flesh-coloured, and the feet were of a light, slaty colour.

Measurements were made as follow:—

Overall Length	64in.
Length of Bill	17.5in.
Length of Wing	24in.
Length of Tarsus	5in.
Length of Tail	7.5in.

From the data presented by Alexander (1928), these measurements and details of colouring are unmistakably referable to *Pelecanus conspicillatus* Temmick, the Australian pelican. The dark portions of the wings and tail being not black but brown indicate that the bird in question was a juvenile.

Pressure of other work during the remainder of the three days spent at Aneityum prevented the gathering of further information beyond the facts that numerous birds similar to the one inspected had been seen and that several had been shot by the natives for food.

A record of the occurrence of pelicans in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate subsequently appeared in the "Pacific Islands Monthly," (Anon., 1952). It was stated therein that some of these birds appeared at Gatukai (a small island of the New Georgia group, Western Solomons) "shortly after the big wind which caused so much damage early this year and it is suggested that they were blown away from their homes, possibly in New Guinea." Later sightings were reported from Kolombangara, New Georgia group (a dozen birds), and from Lunga, Guadalcanal (a score of birds).

A return visit was paid to Aneityum during February and March, 1953. No pelicans were seen in the vicinity of Anelgauhat, where most of the scanty population is concentrated. The first sighting was at 0630 hours on February 19, when a single bird was observed from a launch while passing Anaunse near the north-western limit of the island. This bird was occupying a small rock which was all but awash, about 50 yards offshore. It remained there as the launch went by, and was studied closely through binoculars. The dark parts of its plumage were quite black, and it was identified with certainty as an adult *P. conspicillatus*.

What was in all probability the same bird was seen on the same rock at 1600 hours on February 28, during a launch journey to Port Patrick on the north coast. While staying at Port Patrick I was told by Mr. Harry Freeman, who has spent most of his life on Aneityum and is a keen observer of the island's birds, that two separate flocks of white pelicans arrived in the early months of 1952. The natives had since shot many of them for food and now only about ten were left, living singly at relatively inaccessible parts of the coast.

Some months later, a visit was paid to the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. While at isolated Rennell (11° 40' S., 160° 15' E.), the most southerly island of the Solomons, my wife and I tramped up to Niupani Village on Lake Tenggano (August 19, 1953). This lake, the largest in the tropical South Pacific, supports a unique avifauna. Birds found there include the white ibis, white spoonbill, Australian dabchick, Australian grey duck and black bittern (Mayr, 1945). One of our objectives at the lake was to obtain blood smears from some of these birds as part of a survey of avian haematozoa in the Pacific.

On the way to Lake Tenggano a native from one of the villages there was asked for information concerning the local waterfowl. We were particularly interested in the abundance of ibis, but attempts to describe these birds in pidgin met with no response—largely because I can never seem to remember that in this jargon all birds must be referred to as “pigeons”—until our friend suddenly brightened up and declared: “Me savvy one big fellow pigeon, mouth belong him he big too much.” An attempt to apply this description to *Threskiornis*, with its long, curved bill, was invalidated shortly afterwards when some ibis were seen. No, the bird in question was much bigger than that (this also ruled out the only other Rennellese species to which the description might have been applied, the white spoonbill and the reef heron). About 20 very large, white birds had arrived early the year before. From the picturesque description detailed to us, these could only have been pelicans. They were quite new to the Rennellese, who proceeded to hunt them for food. At the time of the visit, some eighteen months later, only two survivors of the flock were known to be still living on the shores of Lake Tenggano. Neither bird was sighted on this occasion.

Numerous flocks of Australian pelicans thus reached various islands of the Solomons and New Hebrides early in 1952, the first recorded sighting being that at Gatukai shortly after the “big wind” towards the beginning of the year (Anon., 1952). Once back at my Fijian base, information regarding such a wind was sought from Mr. F. E. J. Holley, of the Meteorological Office, Nandi Airport, to whom I am grateful for the following information derived from Australian official sources: On March 3, 1952, the area Queensland-New Guinea-New Hebrides-Norfolk Island was covered by a trough which deepened during the 4th and 5th to a moderate tropical depression, a shallow but very elongated trough stretching from the Central Tasman Sea to south of S.E. New Guinea; on March 6 and 7 this depression drifted east-south-east, and by 0600Z on the 7th, it was well east of the New Hebrides. On March 3 and 4 fairly strong winds were blowing towards to sea, mainly at 7,000 feet and 10,000 feet, over Rockhampton, Queensland; and from the 3rd, westerlies of the order of 270-280/12-16 knots were blowing over the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. From the 5th, these winds (at 3,000, 5,000 and 7,000 feet) gradually turned to 300° or 310° and increased to 20-30 knots, and at 0600Z on the 6th, the 10,000 feet wind over Vila was 310°/42 knots. After the 7th, upper winds over Queensland and the New Hebrides dropped sharply in strength and reverted to the normal south-easterly (Holley, p.c. 1954). Mr. Holley also pointed out that normal south-easterly wind continued at the 3,000 feet level over Rockhampton throughout the period, so that a bird merely attaining this altitude, or descending to it by turbulent downdraft or through tiredness, would have had no further westward assistance, but that had a bird merely drifted at altitudes between 7,000 feet and 10,000 feet it could have reached the New Hebrides from Queensland in little more than two days.

From these data, then, it would appear that the Australian pelicans which arrived in the Solomon Islands and New Hebrides early in 1952 could have been blown from some point or points on the eastern coasts of Queensland and Papua-New Guinea, provided that they could have first attained altitudes of 7,000 feet or so, between March 3 and 7. The “big wind” already referred to (Anon., 1952) was presumably the hurricane which caused widespread damage in the Solomons on January 23-24 (“Pacific Islands Monthly,” 22, (7), 122). However, this hurricane—

which subsequently moved on to cause major destruction in Fiji—arose in the Solomons area ("Pacific Islands Monthly," 22, (7), 15). It could not, therefore, have been responsible for a dispersal of Australian and New Guinea birds into the Pacific. The moderate tropical depression discussed herein affords a likely explanation of this dispersal, the pelicans concerned being carried by upper winds. As to the climbing capacities of *P. conspicillatus*, Dr. R. A. Falla (p.c. 1954) informs me that "over the warm dry areas near Mildura, in October, 1951, I watched pelican flocks gaining altitude until they passed out of range of 8x binoculars, and this I would judge to be at over 4,000 feet."

REFERENCES.

- Alexander, W. B., 1928.—Birds of the Ocean. Putnam's, London. xxiii + 1-428.
Anon., 1952.—Pelicans blown into the Solomons. Pacific Islands Monthly, 23, (2), 78.
Falla, R. A., 1954.—Personal communication, March 10.
Holley, F. E. J., 1954.—Personal communication, February 3.
Mayr, E., 1945.—Birds of the South-west Pacific. MacMillan, New York. xix + 1-316.

BIRDS SINGING AT NIGHT.—Reading the report of J. M. Cunningham in the April issue of *Notornis* (5 (8) : 252) has brought to mind an experience I had four or five years ago, which was very similar to that of Mr. Trim at Palmerston North. I believe I wrote down the details at the time but in any case I cannot find them now. It is clear enough in my memory, however, to recount the following particulars, all of which are remarkably similar to the report mentioned above: In the farm country near Palmerston (Otago) one night late in summer I went out-of-doors at 10.30 p.m. and heard a chorus of blackbirds, and I believe, thrushes, filling the air with full song. Mostly the song came from the pine and macrocarpa trees round the homestead, but I can recall other individuals being closer at hand in the garden shrubs or trees. The night was very warm and still and bright with a full moon. I went to the barometer seeking an explanation in the barometric pressure, and though it is beyond me to remember the reading, I recall that it was not abnormally high nor abnormally low. My only suggestion is that the mildness and brightness of the night was responsible for this unusual nocturnal exuberance.—B. A. Ellis, Dunedin.

Mrs W. H. Rolston, Levin, writes: "I was most interested in the article 'Birds Singing at Night' which appeared in the April issue of *Notornis*. I am writing this as I and my daughter had a similar experience in the same month of August, 1953. Our farm, in Lindsay Road, Levin, is three miles from the Levin Post Office. On the night in question, just before midnight, we became aware that the blackbirds were singing their spring song at the top of their voices in the trees around the house and orchard. My daughter and I listened to them for quite half an hour or more, and they were still singing when we went back to bed at about 12.30 a.m. My daughter went home on August 30, and the singing took place a few nights before she left. It was a bright, clear moonlight night and could possibly have been the same night as that on which your correspondent, Mr. Trim, heard them at Palmerston North. This is the only time that I have ever heard blackbirds singing at night. No thrushes or other birds entered into the singing, although there are plenty of them here."

SHINING CUCKOO ARRIVAL DATES.—Mr. J. M. Cunningham, 39 Renall Street, Masterton, who is collecting data on the arrival dates of the shining cuckoo in New Zealand, states that some letters on this subject forwarded to him in England have gone astray. He asks members who have not received an acknowledgment to send him a further copy of their letters. This refers to 1953 records only.