

# Western Australian Bird Notes

No. 2.

PERTH, W.A.

May, 1945

## REPORTS OF MEETINGS

### FOURTH MEETING, JULY 1, 1944

The fourth meeting of the Western Australian Branch of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union was held at the Museum, Perth, on July 1, 1944, at 2.15 p.m. Major H. M. Whittell presiding over an attendance which included Dr. D. L. Serventy, Messrs. L. Glauert, K. G. Buller, G. Doepel, C. F. H. Jenkins, L. J. McHugh, C. Eakins and V. N. Serventy.

Presentation of the Buller Canning Stock Route Collection to the Museum.—The Chairman stated that this was the second collection which the Museum had received from the Canning Stock Route, between Wiluna and Hall's Creek. In 1930-31, when the wells were being re-conditioned, the Museum taxidermist, Mr. O. H. Lippert, was detailed to accompany the party and his collection of over 200 skins was divided between the South Australian and Western Australian Museums, which had jointly met the expenses of the collector. In 1942 Mr. H. M. Wilson, who was in charge of the re-opening of the wells from Wiluna to Well No. 30 suggested the organisation of an ornithological party to accompany him and Mr. K. G. Buller and Mr. Axel Poignant arranged to go. In 1943 the northern section from Hall's Creek to No. 30 was re-conditioned and Mr. Buller was given an official post with the party, that of pedal wireless operator and first aid assistant. In his spare time he collected bird specimens and other natural history material, often under very trying conditions, the skinning being mostly done at night under the illumination of a carbide lamp. About 200 bird skins were collected and there was now an opportunity for some thorough work being done on the vertebrate zoology of the country traversed by the Route. It was proposed that a part of the Records of the W.A. Museum be issued. Dr. D. L. Serventy to deal with the birds and Mr. L. Glauert the mammals and reptiles. This would also be a fitting tribute to Mr. Lippert to whom Western Australian natural history owed so much.

Mr. Buller, in formally handing over the collection to the Museum, described some of his experiences in making it, mentioning the assistance he received from the natives. He paid a tribute to the late Mr. Lippert who had trained him in the elements of collecting and had inspired and encouraged him.

The bulk of the collection was on display and inspected by the members.

Investigations on Silver-Eyes.—Mr. V. Serventy gave a brief summary of the New Zealand studies on Silver-eyes, using the banding technique and Mr. L. McHugh followed with a short account of his local work. He had devised a small self-releasing trap, worked by the spring of a mouse trap and birds caught were banded with home made rings. Already many "returns" had been registered and the results would be useful in studies of local wandering and the question of moults. It would be interesting if other members could take up the work in adjacent suburbs.

Identification of Albatrosses.—Dr. Serventy, Major Whittell and Mr. Glauert partook in a discussion on the identification of beach drifted albatrosses. A good summary of the points to look for are given in a paper by Mr. H. T. Coudon in the South Australian Ornithologist, 1936.

### FIFTH MEETING, SEPTEMBER 28, 1944

The following attended at the Museum on September 28 at 7.45 p.m.: Major Whittell (in the chair), Dr. D. L. Serventy, Mrs. D. L. Serventy, Miss O. Seymour, Messrs. L. Glauert, C. B. Palmer, K. G. Buller, L. J. McHugh, A. H. Robinson and V. N. Serventy.

Preparing Bird Specimens.—Dr. Serventy gave a preliminary talk on the data obtainable from a skin or specimen. Many people interested in birds failed to get the fullest use out of the information published in books because they were uncertain about the significance of some of the facts given therein. Again, many people who may have occasion to examine a dead bird lose a good opportunity of adding to our store of knowledge of the species by not knowing what sort of data to take about it. Furthermore, and this applies to people in some museums to this day, there was lacking a proper knowledge as to what information to place on the label of specimens they handled.

The label should contain only the essential information concerning the specimen which cannot be obtained from a direct study of the skin. The name, therefore, was the least important item, as this can always be supplied later on. The following were essentials, and are conventionally recorded on the face of the label: Locality, to be as precise as possible;

Date; Sex; Name of collector and of the person who prepared the skin and took the observations. On the reverse side of the label the following additional items about the specimen should appear: Length from tip of beak to end of the longest tail feather, in a direct line and with the specimen gently stretched (no additional dimensions are necessary as the length of wing, beak, tarsus, etc., can be readily got from the skin, and in the field it is wasting time to bother about them. With some birds, however, the expanse of the wings, i.e. between the outstretched wing-tips, may be usefully recorded). Weight, wherever accurate measuring scales or balances are available; be careful of shop scales. Colour of the bare parts, such as the beak, feet, iris, and any naked areas about the head, also the colour of the inside of the mouth (this may vary between the sexes, or according to age, or with the season); all colours should be recorded immediately as they may alter after death and false recordings are then liable; use simple colour terms, avoiding indefinite or ambiguous words. Age of the bird can be gauged in two ways, not very widely practised. The methods are described fully in two papers which should be consulted for further details. These are "Some Points in Labelling Specimens," by C. B. Ticehurst, Ibis, April, 1925: 461-464, and "The Preparation of Birds for Study," by J. P. Chapin, obtainable from the American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West, New York, for 15 cents).

The first method of assessing age is by noting the degree of ossification of the roof of the skull and on the label the collector should note whether the skull was or was not ossified. "In the nestling the bony roof of the brain case is very thin and transparent. . . Holding an adult skull up to the light, after removal of the brain, one will note that the roof of the skull, back of the eyes, shows fine dark specks all over. . . As the young bird develops, the transparent area of the skull top becomes restricted, the dotted structure appearing around its edges (Chapin)."

As this process is completed within about six months it gives a very positive method of identifying young birds. For birds over that age, yearlings can still be identified as such by the condition of the ovary and oviduct. The virgin oviduct "is quite straight, thin and almost transparent (Ticehurst)". Once an egg has passed down the oviduct it never recovers this form but in the non-breeding stage it always has a twisted sunken appearance and is more opaque. The collector should record female specimens as either "juv. by oviduct" or "ad. by oviduct." Similarly with the ovary. "In a bird which has laid the ovary in the quiescent stage is more definitely granular than is one which has not due to the fact that when unused ova shrink again after breeding, they do not quite revert to the previous or immature size." The collector should preferably make a natural size sketch of the ovary or testis on the label or give measurements.

Mr. Buller then gave a demonstration of skinning, using only a pen-knife as tool. A useful manual of self instruction on modern lines is Chapin's profusely illustrated little bulletin just mentioned. As a poisoning agent Mr. Buller uses arsenical soap, but a good field method advocated by American collectors, is powdered arsenic dusted on to the skin. In the absence of these borax will serve. In hot weather birds may be temporarily preserved for delayed skinning by injecting the mouth and vent with Phenol disulfate. The same fluid can be sponged over the beak and in the mouth to deter blowfly attack. In storage, insects can be kept away with flaked naphthalene. If attacks are suspected the skins can be fumigated with carbon bisulphide, 1oz. of the fluid being placed in a shallow dish in the box of specimens for about 24 hours. The intention of this talk was not to make collectors but to obtain fullest scientific value from specimens members might happen across.

A Grass Owl From Cranbrook.—Mr. Glauert exhibited a specimen of what was believed to be the Grass Owl (*Tyto longimembris*) sent to the Museum from Cranbrook, and hitherto unrecorded from this State. See "The Emu," vol. 44, 1945: 220.

### SIXTH MEETING, DECEMBER 8, 1944

The following attended at the Museum on December 8 at 7.45 p.m.: Major Whittell (in the chair), Miss Seymour, Messrs. Eakins, Palmer, Doepel, G. P. Whitley, Robinson, H. M. Wilson, Jenkins, Buller, V. Serventy, McHugh and Dr. D. L. Serventy.