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A Trip to the "Watercourse," North West N.S.W.

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During a very pleasant holiday at Cococalla, Garah, the residence of Mr. F. C. Morse, 36 miles to the W. of Moree, one of the many interesting outings planned was that to the region that is known as "The Watercourse." Mr. Morse and the writer in one motor car and Mr. A. Mawhinney, with Mr. Reg. Hays (M's. R.A.O.U.) in another, constituted the party, and loaded up with provisions, mosquito nets, tents, etc., and old clothes and boots (for wading), we set out early in October last year for our destination, some 25 miles away.

The Great Western plains, after their two years of excessive drought and subsequent soaking, since the drought broke, were simply rolling prairies of growth, in which the Brolgas or Native Companion, Kangaroos, and Emus were easily hidden from view, save for such places where the luxurious growth was not as tall. Thousands of acres of this country rolled away, far as the eye could see, interspersed with trees of many varieties—for the most part not very tall—Coolibahs, Red-gums, tall, tapering Belahs, and many others.

Across huge paddocks, the deep ruts cut by the wool teams in "the black-soil plains," the only track, on and on to the N.W. till we reached that part of the Watercourse we proposed to work, *viz.*, Direlmabindi, and the area around Curragundi Station.

At Direlmabindi, we were met by Mr. S. Freeman, who has a permanent camp home there, and were given a cordial welcome. Here we were to camp, and we were greeted with the news that Mr. Freeman had found the nest of the White-eyed Duck, with nine eggs, in a clump of rushes in the swamp a couple of hundred yards from his tents. The nest was placed just above the water level, and built for the most part of down from the bird, which, of course, definitely decided the species of the owner.

After spending some days here we very reluctantly packed up and made for Curragundi Station home paddocks. From this base another section of the region was worked.

One outstanding fact all over this region is the great amount of damage done to all the aquatic birds breeding on or near the water by both foxes and wild pigs, and of the latter we saw scores, from "suckers" to huge boars and sows. A brief description of what exactly is meant by the Watercourse is now necessary.

"THE WATERCOURSE."

The Watercourse is that portion of the Gwydir River which ends as a defined river channel, and spreads itself roughly fan-shaped over the surrounding plains. The Gwydir rises in the New England tableland, about 200 miles from the town of Moree, in N.W. New South Wales. At Moree it is a fine stream, but 9 miles below Moree the channel narrows, and practically disappears, and in flood-time huge volumes of water spread all over the surrounding plains through swamps and shallow water-courses. The largest of the latter, which naturally continues running longest, is "The" Watercourse. These flooded areas occupy from 80,000 to 100,000 acres, interspersed by belts or ridges raised only a few feet above the water. The waters eventually drain into the Barwon River, above Collareenabri. The average depth of these waters is 1 foot, and the rate of flow is slow, as the fall is about 8 feet in a mile. The whole area contains many timbers, in addition to huge beds of "sags," a kind of bulrush, and large belts of Wilga. Further on is a list of trees and shrubs compiled by Mr. F. Morse.

As can readily be imagined, all our tramps and excursions were through water all day long, and the going was consequently very often "painful and slow." Sometimes we would find ourselves in a deeper and more swiftly-moving channel, and one had always to be on the look-out for the sunken logs and hidden stumps. As the "bottom" for the most part was muddy and full of widely-gaping cracks, one was constantly slipping or at times sitting down in the water.

Flies and mosquitoes were in millions, but the latter not as bad as they can be, and at such times they become a real plague to man and beast. In the belts of timber were birds in scattered numbers, colonies of Night Herons in one, Spoonbills or White-necked Herons in another. A grassed area would be filled with White-headed Stilt Plovers. A tree-studded swampy area, with sags and rushes, etc., with the floating nests of the Grebes, whilst out of bushes and clumps the Moorhens, Coots, Land-rails, etc., would make their flippy flight, with legs a-draggle. The work was hard, the going laborious, and twilight and dry clothes a goal to strive for.

Coolibah, *Eucalyptus bicolor*; Red gum, *Eucalyptus rostrata*; Eurah, *Eremophila bignoniiflora*; Belah, *Casuarina lepidophloia*; Wilga, *Geigeria parviflora*; Sandalwood, *Eremophila mitchelli*; White Box, Bibble, *Eucalyptus* (sp. ?); White Wood, *Atalaya hemiylanca*; Bumble (Caper-tree), *Capparis mitchelli*; Leopard wood, *Flindersia maculosa*; Pine, *Callitris robusta*; Needle wood, *Hakea leucoptera*; Quinine, *Alstonia constricta*; Boonary, *Heterodendron oleofolium*.

The following is a list of the birds seen, with some notes where it is advisable. Mostly all the birds seen were nesting, but the list is mainly a "locality" one, to show bird distribution:—

LIST OF BIRDS SEEN ON "THE WATERCOURSE."

P = plentiful.
 NP = not plentiful.
 V = very plentiful.
 R = rare.
 FP = fairly plentiful.

Emu (*Dromaius nova-hollandiæ*). Time, May to June.

Stubble Quail (*Coturnix pectoralis*). At times in countless thousands.

Brown Quail (*Synoicus australis*)—P. along watercourses and swamps.

Painted Quail (*Turnix varia*)—FP.

Little Quail (*Turnix velox*)—VP.

Barred-shouldered Dove (*Geopelia humeralis*), Peaceful Dove (*G. placida*), Diamond Dove (*G. cuneata*)—NP.

Crested Pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophotes*)—VP.

Pectoral Rail (*Hypotaenidia philippensis*)—P.

Australian Spotted Crake (*Porzana fluminea*), Spotless Crake (*P. plumbea*)—R.

Little Crake (*P. pusilla*)—P.

Black-tailed Native Hen (*Microtribonyx ventralis*), Black Moor Hen (*Gallinula tenebrosa*)—P. Breeds in lignum bushes and on the ground.

Bald Coot (*Porphyrio melanotus*)—FP.

Australian Coot (*Fulica australis*)—P.

Black-throated Grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*), Hoary-headed Grebe (*P. poliocephalus*)—P. Nests October-December.

Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)—R. Small young seen here, March, 1910.

Marsh Tern (*Chlidonias leucopareia*)—NP.

Stilt (*Himantopus leucocephalus*)—VP. Breeding.

Red-kneed Dottrel (*Erythrogonys cinctus*)—P.

Spur-winged Plover (*Lobivex nova-hollandiæ*)—P.

Black-breasted Plover (*Zonifer tricolor*)—P.

Black-fronted Dottrel (*Charadrius melanops*)—P.

Snipe (*Gallinago australis*)—P.

Australian Painted Snipe (*Rostratula australis*). Occasional small flocks in swamps, where they breed.

Bustard (*Eupodotis australis*). Not numerous now, owing to the fox.

Native Companion (Crane) (*Antigone rubicunda*)—P. During the dry season they retire to the prickly pear country, living on the fruit.

Straw-necked Ibis (*Carphibis spinicollis*). White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*). Large rookery on watercourses, nests in the lignums. White on one clump, and the straw-necked on another.

Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*). Flock of about 50 seen.

Black-billed (Royal) Spoonbill (*Platalea regia*)—FP. In company with Ibis, breeding together in October-November.

Yellow-billed Spoonbill (*Platibis flavipes*)—P.

Plumed Egret (*Egretta intermedia*)—NP.

Australian Egret (*E. alba*)—P. One colony breeding October-December.

White-fronted Heron (*Notophox noræ-hollandiæ*)—VP.

White-necked Heron (*N. pacifica*)—P. One colony of about 15 was nesting in tall Redgums in water on September 24; most clutches were incomplete.

Nankeen Night-Heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*). 200-300 seen in one colony; only one nest found (10.10.1920).

Pied Goose (*Anseranas semipalmata*)—NP. Breeding in October and November.

Maned Goose (*Chenonetta jubata*)—P. Mostly on creeks and bore-drains.

Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*)—FP, in November and December, 1920.

Plumed Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna eytoni*)—VP. Nesting in October. Nests found destroyed by foxes. Most plentiful duck.

Black Duck (*Anas superciliosa*)—P. Apparently rearing 2nd brood.

Grey Teal (*Virago gibberifrons*)—VP. Nests in every available hollow spout and trunk.

Blue-winged Shoveller Duck (*Spatula rhyncotis*)—NP. Breeding; one authentic clutch found.

White-eyed Duck (*Nyroca australis*)—P. Clutches of 9 eggs. Nests placed in isolated clumps of rushes, close to surface of the water.

Large Black Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), Small Black Cormorant (*P. ater*), Large Pied Cormorant (*P. hypoleucus*), Small Pied Cormorant (*P. melanoleucus*)—VP. Breeding November-December.

Darter (*Anhinga novæ-hollandiæ*)—R. Breeding in December.

Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*)—P, where the waters are deeper.

Spotted Harrier (*Circus assimilis*)—P. Where "sags" grow higher up.

Allied Harrier (*Circus approximans*)—R. In spite of swampy nature of country.

Wedgetailed Eagle (*Uroæetus andax*)—NP.

Whistling Eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*)—FP. Lives on cast-up fish and birds' eggs, especially from ibis rookeries.

Little Falcon (*Falco longipennis*)—R.

Brown Hawk (*Heiracidea berigora*)—VP. Seen taking the young out of other birds' nests.

Boobook Owl (*Spiloglaux boobook*)—R.

Delicate Owl (*Tyto alba*)—R., but plentiful when quail or mice are numerous.

Sp. ? Heard hooting; not a boobook.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita*)—P.

Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*)—VP.

Cockatoo-Parrot (*Calopsitta novæ-hollandiæ*)—P.

Red-winged Parrot (*Aprosmictus erythropterus*)—P.

Pale-headed Rosella (*Platycercus pallidiceps*)—N.P. Large river trees.

Yellow-mantled Parrot (*Platycercus eximius' splendidus*). Plenty until summer months. Does not breed here.

Ring-necked Parrot (*Barnardius barnardi*)—P.

Crimson-bellied Parrot (*P. hæmatogaster*)—P.

Red-backed Parrot (*Psephotus hæmatonotus*)—R.

Warbling Grass-Parakeet (*Melopsittacus undulatus*)—P.

Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*)—P.

Owlet Nightjar (*Egotheles cristata*)—P.

Great Brown Kingfisher (*Dacelo gigas*)—P.

Red-backed Kingfisher (*Halcyon pyrrhopygius*)—R.

Sacred Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*)—P.

Bee-Eater (*Merops ornatus*)—P. Has arrived the fourth week in September for years past; coming from the north.

Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*)—P.

Fantailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*). Here for a short time in spring, returning for the winter.

Black-eared Cuckoo (*Mesocalius osculans*)—R.

Narrow-billed Bronze Cuckoo (*Chalcites basalis*)—P.

Bronze Cuckoo (*Lamprococcyx plagiatus*)—R.

Welcome Swallow (*Hirundo neoxena*)—P.

Fairy Martin (*Lagenoplastes ariel*)—VP.

Tree Martin (*Hylachelidon nigricans*)—VP.

Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*)—P.

Hooded Robin (*Melanodryas cucullata*)—P.

Short-billed Tree Tit (*Smicrornis brevirostris*)—VP.

White-throated Fly-eater (*Gerygone alboocularis*).

Brown Fly-eater (*Gerygone fusca*).

Yellow-rumped Shrike Robin (*Eopsaltria australis chrysorrhoa*). Plentiful in the big Belah scrubs interspersing the Watercourse.

Yellow-bellied Shrike Tit (*Falcunculus frontatus*)—FP. Note entirely different from that of Southern birds; as no specimen was taken, plumage comparison with the latter was missed.

Crested Bell Bird (*Oreoica gutturalis*)—FP.

Yellow-breasted Whistler (*Pachycephala pectoralis*). Found breeding. As far as is known, this is the first record of this species in this district.

Rufous-breasted Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris*)—P.

White-shafted Fantail (*Rhipidura flabellifera*)—NP.

Black and White Fantail (*Leucocirca tricolor*)—VP.

Restless Flycatcher (*Seisura inquieta*)—FP.

Leaden Flycatcher (*Myiagra rubecula*)—R.

Cuckoo Shrike, Black-faced (*Graucalus nova-hollandiae*)—P. Most numerous on Gwydir River.

Cuckoo Shrike, Little (*Graucalus mentalis*)—R.

Cuckoo Shrike, Ground (*Pteropodocys phasianella*)—NP.

Caterpillar-eater, White-shouldered (*Campephaga tricolor*)—VP. Nests in profusion.

Australian Babbler (*Pomatostomus temporalis*)—P.

Brown Song Lark (*Cinctorhamphus cruralis*). Usually very common, but scarce at time of our visit.

Rufous Song Lark (*Ptenoedus mathewsi*)—FP. Scattered throughout the ringed timber.

Little Grassbird (*Megalurus gramineus*)—P. Nest feathers placed in the usual "hooded" manner.

Yellow Tit-Warbler (*Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*)—P.

Yellow-rumped Tit-Warbler (*Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*)—P.

Red-rumped Tit-Warbler—R, and only few nests seen.

Chestnut-rumped Tit-Warbler (*Acanthiza uropygialis*)—P.

Blue Wren-Warbler (*Malurus cyaneus*)—NP.

White-winged Wren-Warbler (*Malurus leuconotus*) — FP. Breeds in "Roley-poley" bushes on the plains.

Lambert's (Variegated) Wren-Warbler (*Malurus lamberti*)—FP. Noted in the lignum bushes in the swamps, and watercourses, as well as in more usual haunts.

White-browed Wood-Swallow (*Artamus superciliosus*), White-rumped Wood-Swallow (*A. leucorhynchus*), Masked Wood-Swallow (*A. personatus*), Black-faced Wood-Swallow (*A. cinereus*)—P.

Wood-Swallow (*A. tenebrosus*)—NP.

Little Wood-Swallow (*A. minor*)—R.

Grey Shrike Thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*)—P.

Magpie Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*)—VP.

White-face (*Alphelocephala leucopsis*)—VP. Nesting in hollow spouts.

Orange-winged Tree-runner (*Neositta chrysoptera*)—FP.

Brown Tree-creeper (*Climacteris picumna*)—VP. Feeds at the kitchen doors.

White-throated Tree-creeper (*Climacteris leucophæa*). Only in tall Belah scrubs.

Mistletoe Bird (*Dicæum hirundinaceum*)—P.

Pardalotes, both red-tipped (*Pardalotus striatus*) and orange-tipped (*Pardalotus assimilis*) are fairly plentiful. Their notes were exactly alike, but entirely different from the similar species of more Southern latitudes. The note is "chip-chip," not "wit-ee-chu," as uttered by the red-tipped elsewhere. In examining specimens of each, we noticed that the white outer edge and tip was missing in the 2nd primary feather of the orange-tipped, while there was only a faint trace of white towards the final third

of the similar feather in the red-tipped. We do not think this has been recorded before, although Dr. W. Macgillivray (Broken Hill) mentions the unequal amount and distribution of the white margin in the specimens around Coleraine (Vic.) (North, Vol. II., p. 219). These birds, with the same notes, showed (a) red tips, (b) reddish orange tips. Probably they are *assimilis*, showing the range of colour in the tips as described by Hall, in his Handbook. Their nests here are always in trees, and they are never known to breed in tunnels in banks. The writer of this article found the red-tipped breeding both in the trees and banks on the Snowy River, near Jindabyne (N.S.W.).

Black-throated Honey-eater (*Melithreptus gularis*). Brown-headed Honey-eater (*Melithreptus brevirostris*). Thinly dispersed.

Striped Honey-eater (*Plectorhynchus lanceolatus*)—P.

Painted Honey-eater (*Grantiella picta*)—R.

Singing Honey-eater (*Meliphaga sonora*)—R.

White-plumed Honey-eater (*Meliphaga penicillata*)—VP. In Coolibahs and Red Gums.

Noisy Miner (*Myzantha garrula*)—VP.

Yellow-throated Miner (*Myzantha flavigula*)—VP.

Spiny-checked Honey-eater (*Acanthagenys rufigularis*)—P.

Blue-faced Honey-eater (*Entomyza cyanotis*)—FP.

Friar-bird (Leatherhead) (*Tropidorhynchus corniculatus*). Found chiefly on banks of larger streams.

Yellow-throated Friar-Bird (*Philemon citreogularis*)—P.

Pipit (*Anthus australis*)—NP.

Horsfield's Bush Lark (*Mirafra javanica*)—FP.

Spotted-sided Finch (*Stagonopleura guttata*)—P.

Chestnut-eared Finch (*Tæniopygia castanotis*)—V.P.

Banded Finch (*Stizoptera bichenovii*)—FP.

Plum-headed Finch (*Aidemosyne modesta*)—P.

Australian Oriole (*Oriolus sagittatus*)—P.

Spotted Bower Bird (*Chlamydera maculata*). Scattered through the district. Playgrounds in dry ridges of sandalwood. Usual assortment of bones, pieces of glass, the latter chiefly lilac or amethyst colour in harmony with the bird's "colour patch." Noted.—The heavier articles, as nails, bolts, etc., are always placed in centre of the bower. Bowers less arched-over than those of the Satin-Bird. These birds are great fruit robbers.

Raven (*Corvus australis*)—VP.

Choughs (*Corcorax melanorhamphus*)—FP.

Grey Jumper (*Struthidea cinerea*)—VP.

Black-throated Butcher Bird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*)—FP.
Notes more flute-like than those of the Collared Butcher Bird.

Black-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*)—P.



Mr. Bellchambers at his mound. The male Mallee-Fowl (*Leipoa ocellata*) assists in uncovering the egg and also in covering it again.