

- The Brush Cuckoo *Cacomantis variolosus* relies on other birds to rear its young. In September 1984 a young cuckoo was seen being fed by Yellow-tinted Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus flavescens*.
- The Australian Grebe *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae* was seen with four chicks in April 1984.
- The Buff-banded Rail *Rallus philippensis* was seen with chicks in January 1984 and in February 1985.
- The Wandering Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna arcuata* was seen with a mate and 13 chicks late in April 1984. They were seen again six weeks later.

BIRD WATCHING OBSERVATIONS

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UNIDENTIFIED MANNIKIN

On 20 September, 1986, at 17:30 hrs I was watching a flock of Grey-headed Mannikin *Lonchura caniceps* on the campus of Pacific Adventist College, near Port Moresby. Together with this species there were a few Chestnut-breasted Mannikins *Lonchura castaneothorax*. At a range of about 40 feet, I saw a mannikin that resembled neither of these two species. The head, throat and chest were all dark: - black or dark grey. The dark colour on the chest was uniform and extended well down, about half way down the front of the body. The cut off line for the dark colour was quite distinct. The belly was white. There was no chestnut colour on the front of the bird at all. At first I thought that it might be a Black-breasted Mannikin *Lonchura teerinki*. However it seems to be unlikely as this species is listed as being a mountain resident, found from at 1000 feet upwards. The College Campus is at only 150 m. The bird did not look like an immature Grey-headed Mannikin which is often seen on Campus. The only other possibility would be an immature Chestnut-breasted Mannikin.

FEEDING HABITS OF BRAHMINY KITES *HALIAETUR INDUS*

During the winter months of 1986 at the Pacific Adventist College, near Port Moresby, I several times observed Brahminy Kites feeding on the larvae and the pupae of a species of moth or butterfly that feeds on *Delonix regia* leaves. To achieve this the birds would circle over the target tree for some time getting lower and lower, then when about twenty feet above the top of the tree, they would dive down and clutch with their talons at the selected larva or pupa and fly off with what they had succeeded in getting. The trees involved were very close to inhabited houses, some within only 10 m.

OBSERVATION OF A MIGRATING SACRED KINGFISHER *HALCYON SANCTA*.

During the weekend of 27-31 March 1986 I visited the village of Domara, a few miles to the south-east of Cape Rodney, Central Province. On the morning of 30 March I joined a group of village people for a fish drive on the main reef, which was some ten miles offshore. Four large canoes set off with about 80 men. We left a little after sunrise. We travelled south for about two miles, by

which time the weather changed, and a large rain-storm began to lash us, with strong winds. All four canoes took shelter to the leeward of a large sand-bar, where we were protected from the wind and waves. Here we waited out the storm. While riding at anchor, I noticed a Sacred Kingfisher flying around the canoes trying to land. After several attempts the bird crashed into my canoe. One of the men close to me picked it up and gave it to me. It was wet through to the skin, and obviously exhausted. For some time it tried to peck at me, but soon settled down. From the time of year I assume that the bird was on migration from Australia, and had been caught in the bad weather when only a few miles from its destination. During the hour that we waited out the storm the kingfisher lay relaxed in my hand.

When the rain and wind ceased to be a problem, we began to move away from our sheltered waters, and then we turned South to head towards the main reef still some five or six miles distant at that point of the coast. As soon as the canoe turned south, the kingfisher began to struggle in my hand and tried to get away from me.

This kingfisher had been flying in a northerly direction, and at the time no sun was visible, due to the very heavy cloud cover. Since the worst of the squall was now between us and the land, we could not see the land either. My conclusion, as I observed the bird's behaviour was that it struggled to get free at the precise moment we turned south, because it sensed that we were taking it in the direction from which it had just come, and away from the land to which it wished to travel. I kept the bird safely on the canoe all day, and took it back to land in the evening. During the night it got away and made its escape, safely.

KITES AND OTHER BIRDS FEEDING ON CATERPILLAR INFESTATIONS IN POINCIANA TREES *DELONIX REGIA* IN POPONDETTA, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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INTRODUCTION

In the garden of house No. 2, Bambusi Street, Popondetta, Oro Province, Papua New Guinea, stands a poinciana tree *Delonix regia*. This tree, as well as several other tree species in the town, is periodically subject to severe attack by small brown/black, hairless caterpillars, presumably the larvae of a moth. If not themselves subject to predation these caterpillars can strip the leaves until the tree is almost bare. Between 1980 and 1982 I noticed that several species of birds, some of them surprisingly large to be taking such small prey, were taking advantage of these caterpillar plagues and were using them opportunistically as superabundant food sources.

OBSERVATIONS

On 21 June 1980 I saw several Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrikes *Coracina novaehollandiae* and several Metallic Starlings *Aplonis metallica* feeding on caterpillars which were in plague proportions in the *Delonix regia* at house No. 2. These birds were capturing the caterpillars by snatching/gleaning them off the foliage with their beaks.

On 28 February 1982 I saw other birds feeding on the same type of caterpillars infesting the same poinciana tree: one of the Bronze Cuckoos *Chrysococcyx* sp.; a Brush-Cuckoo *Cacomantis variolosus*; a White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina papuensis*; a Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys*; a Brown Oriole *Oriolus szalayi*; and a Mimic Meliphaga *Meliphaga analoga*. I also saw a flock of ten or twelve Torresian Crows *Corvus orru* in the vicinity - an exceptionally large flock for Popondetta where these crows are normally only seen in ones and twos. There is a high probability that these crows were also feeding on the caterpillars. I observed no aggression amongst the six species that were feeding in the one tree.

On 6 March 1982 I saw eight or nine Black Kites *Milvus migrans* and one Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* feeding on identical caterpillars in the same poinciana tree. The feeding method was the same for both species, but different from that of the previously mentioned species: a kite would sweep in, snatch a caterpillar from the tree with its feet whilst on the wing, and then fly away whilst simultaneously lifting its legs to the beak to feed. This prey capture action was repeated continuously.

On 7 March 1982 in Popondetta (although not at house No.2) I made the very unusual sighting of several Black Kites *Milvus migrans*, a Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* and a Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus*. These birds were presumably after the caterpillars, as many of the trees in town had similar infestations.

DISCUSSION

Reports of birds at superabundant food sources such as fruiting or flowering trees, insect swarms, etc. are fairly common. However, although abundant, these caterpillars were quite small, no more than 2mm in body diameter and 10 to 20mm in length. The large raptors feeding on these small caterpillars looked faintly ridiculous and the behaviour is noteworthy. Bell (1985) summarises known information on these three kites in Papua New Guinea, including their food and feeding methods but does not mention that any of the three feed on caterpillars. Similarly Coates (1985) makes no mention of the habit. Presumably even the large kites, despite the method of capture, must have realized a net energy gain because of the almost continuous feeding permitted by the superabundance of caterpillars.

The cuckoos, of course, are to be expected, as they are caterpillar feeders par excellence. Some cuckoo-shrikes are also known to feed regularly on caterpillars in New Guinea (Coates, pers. comm.; Lamothe 1979; McWhirter 1986); and the oriole, starlings and fantail flycatcher are not surprising as they too take the occasional caterpillar (Lamothe, 1979; McWhirter 1986; pers.

obs.). The honeyeater *Meliphaga analoga*, however, is rather surprising, and suggests that this species is rather more catholic in its choice of food than originally thought.

Bell (1985) quotes several examples to show that the Black Kite is very adaptable in its habits. The foregoing observations of kites are another example of such adaptability. By taking apparently nutritious, superabundant prey usually deemed abnormally small for the size of the predators, the kites are demonstrating an extreme feeding opportunism. This may enhance the species' ability to survive in semi-urban or otherwise relatively impoverished habitats, where more specialised feeders could not persist.

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THE LOCATION AND ALTITUDE OF MT. SCRATCHLEY SUMMIT

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Clapp (1986) mistakenly assumes that the PTC Microwave Repeated Station is at the summit of Mt. Scratchley. He has been misled by the location of the name 'Mt. Scratchley' on the 1:100,000 topographic map and on the 1976, 1:50,000 cadastral map (Clapp, pers. comm.). The name has been lettered on the former between the 3280 m and the 3480 m contours in a position where it appears to nominate the knoll above the 3250 contour line as Mt. Scratchley. This knoll is about five km north-west of the summit, which is itself some 2.5 km north of English Peaks. The repeater station is in fact on another knoll approximately 4 km to the west and 268 m (881 ft) below the actual summit.

In 1965 Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia) Ltd. was contracted to test the practicality of a microwave radio telecommunications link across the central cordillera to interconnect Port Moresby, Lae, Goroka, Madang and Mount Hagen. Their contract was to undertake extended propagation testing between Mt. Scratchley and Mt. Strong, a distance of 110 km: more than twice the