

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 szalayii*; 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am indebted to B.J. Coates for comment on an initial draft of this paper; notwithstanding, any error contained herein is mine alone.

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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

distance between repeater stations elsewhere in the World. In selecting the testing site the summit of Mt. Scratchley was deliberately avoided, primarily because of doubts that it provided a clear line-of-sight to Mt. Strong, a critical prerequisite. A second reason for selecting the present site was that it provided a suitable construction area for the tower and shelter hut.

The control survey for the Mt Scratchley Repeater Station site (Central Mapping Bureau, Reg. No. 7539) shows the location of the ground level survey marker on the site (located where the helicopters land) as 8° 43' 59" S and 147° 26' 13" E, at an altitude of 3571.792 m. The grid reference for this location on the 1:100,000 topographic map is EL481346; the Repeater Station is shown as a small square 'building' dot on this map at that grid point. A 1:1,000,000 scale sketch map of the repeater station site in its relationship to the peak is included on PTC Drawing PT-1854C. On the 1976 edition of the 1:250,000 Joint Operations Graphic (Air) map the 'spot' summit elevation is given as 12599 + 100 ft (3840 + 30 m).

It is unfortunate that the 1:100,000 and 1:50,000 maps do not clearly indicate that 'Mt Scratchley' and 'English Peaks' are both part of the same massif. The Mt Scratchley massif above 3400 m elevation is about 15 km long and about 5 km wide, reducing to a very irregular strip about 6 km long and averaging about 1 km wide at the 3600 m level.

In a reference to *Orthonyx temminckii* Clapp (1986) says "There is a record of this species at 11,000 ft (3354 m) on Mt Scratchley and Mt Knutsford in 1898 (Rothschild & Hartert, 1903) but it is well known that these old records are notoriously unreliable with regard to altitude.....MacGregor (1898) gave the altitude for the summit of Mt Scratchley as 12860 ft (3921 m). This is not a surprising error given that the methods used to obtain altitude were the boiling point of water and the aneroid barometer.". Given the actual altitude of 12599 feet at the summit, MacGregor's calculated altitude was only 261 ft (81 m) in error not 1311 ft as Clapp suggests.

While the error in the location and altitude of Mt Scratchley is of little ornithological significance, the correction is important because of the inappropriate generalisation about the inaccuracy of old records. I have found another instance where the later interpretations of old records have been at fault (Heron 1975; Lecroy & Peckover 2987; Meise 1931; Mayr & Rand 1937). These wrong interpretations often remain uncorrected and are subsequently quoted without checking or verifying the original source.

I seriously question Clapp's assumptions that "...the drier season brings man, and with him fire", and the need of "...a patrolled high altitude National Park set-up.", in respect of Mt Scratchley.

There is strong evidence that the repeater station knoll and possibly all of the surrounding heathland areas are regenerating fire-devastated moss forest. There is, however, no evidence of recent fire devastation, nor of fires occurring over an extended period of time. Aerial photographs taken during the early 1970s for the 1:100,000 and 1:250,000 modern maps could provide worthwhile time-scale information about fires.

Because growth and decomposition at high altitudes is slow it can be estimated that fire devastation occurred between 40 and 100 years ago. Present growth in the heathland area is mostly shrubs up to a height of 3 m. The main evidence of moss forest regeneration is the presence of a number of conifer saplings, ranging between 1.5 and 2 m in height.

Like most New Guinea high mountain areas, Mt Scratchley is subject to drying winds. Grasses and bushes are usually dry within two hours of an extended rainfall even in the wet season. Although the fire devastation on the mountain could have been man-initiated an equally feasible explanation is multiple lightning strikes during an extended dry spell. The extent of fire damage and the fact that all of the fire-killed trees give the appearance of having died at about the same time gives weight to the theory of lightning having been the ignition agent.

The high areas of Mt Scratchley have little to offer man and consequently are rarely visited. The area is too high to support a human population - the reason for Clapp's observation on the absence of pigs. There are no roads or trails, only tracks which may be used once to twice a year. For these reasons regular 'high-altitude patrols' on this mountain would be a waste of resources. Such patrols could in fact be counter-productive through habitat interference by patrol members. At present this particular area is virtually untouched by man; surely it is best left that way.

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MAPS

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DRAWINGS

Central Mapping Bureau - Surveyor-General (1976). Control Survey: Station Summary, 7539C Mt Scratchley. Papua New Guinea.
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