

## FROM FIELD AND STUDY

**Great Egret feeding on birds** – In the course of a late afternoon visit to Herdsman Lake, Perth, on 5 March 1995, a Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) was observed actively feeding on Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*).

A mixed flock of some 3–400 Welcome Swallows and Tree Martins (*Hirundo nigricans*) was present. Although at any one time many of these birds were resting on dried-out mud banks or on vegetation, the majority were feeding, heading into the wind, over open water: their highest concentration being near to the edge of the bulrushes.

A Great Egret stationed itself, in approximately mid-tarsus depth water, along this main flight line and was seen to lunge at any swallow or martin that came within range. Its normal stance was crouched, the neck doubled over the back, the head being only slightly above the shoulders, and the legs slightly flexed. The bird was fixedly watching, and when a swallow or martin came near, it could be seen that the body swayed slightly, the neck was fractionally raised and the bill partially opened. If the swallow (or martin) moved off, the original posture was immediately resumed, but if it came nearer a strike was made. This frequently resulted in the otherwise static bird taking a pace or two to regain balance. In a capture, (observed through a telescope) the swallow was caught at the base of the wing.

No special effort seemed to be

exerted in killing the victim, it was manipulated so that the egret's bill gripped the body lengthways, where it was held for about half a minute, after which its struggling appeared to cease. From that point the egret dipped the bird into the water and commenced trying to swallow it (always head first).

This process obviously represented quite a problem for it. Several times the swallow's wings became caught, protruding on either or both sides of the gape. The bird would then be coughed-up, re-dipped in the water and repositioned before swallowing. By the time the bird was finally swallowed it appeared to be thoroughly waterlogged. Despite the apparent difficulty in getting the bird down, no attempt to dismember or break-up the prey by tearing or stabbing etc. was noted. Once the bird was swallowed, a drink was taken and straightaway the egret was actively seeking another victim.

As a diversion to this behaviour, the egret was observed stalking through the low herbage and across the mud bank where the swallows and martins were resting, but this approach was not successful and it quickly resorted to a position along the edge of the bulrushes.

The success rate of the egret's strikes was about one in ten, which during the period of observation amounted to a capture every half an hour. Lunges were made at both Welcome Swallows and Tree Martins, but the only captures noted involved swallows.

At the time of observation the weather was fine and sunny and there was a rather fresh breeze



which would have had the effect of decreasing the swallow's ground speed which probably assisted the egret's hunting method.

This behaviour has not been recorded previously by us either in Australia or elsewhere. It would be of interest to see if such active hunting methods become more common and widespread and to see if it is learned by other individuals.

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**A blue-winged Pitta (*Pitta moluccensis*) in Western Australia**

– On 6 November 1994 Mr John Cord of Karratha, found a live pitta on the loading jetty for Woodside Petroleum, on Burrup Peninsula, Western Australia. The bird was exhausted and had a slightly damaged wing. It was kept by Mr Cord in a small aviary for several days then air freighted to the Perth Zoo.

Details of the bird are as follows: weight 70 g; exposed culmen 23.6 mm; entire culmen 29.3 mm; wing 115 mm; tail 41 mm; tarsus 35.8 mm; middle toe and claw 32.7 mm; iris dark brown; orbital ring grey; bill greyish brown, paler on base of lower mandible; gape pinkish orange; legs pink. Upperparts: centre of crown black; broad eyebrow stripe buffy brown, the feathers with paler tips; lore, side of face and hindneck black; back and scapulars dull dark green; rump bright purplish blue; upperwing coverts bright purplish blue, some feathers with green tips; primaries and outer secondaries black with large white

patch in centre of wing; tail black with bluish green tip. Underparts: chin and throat white; neck, breast and flanks cinnamon buff to cinnamon rufous; centre of belly, vent and undertail coverts pinkish red; undertail black; underwing coverts blackish, rest of underwing dull grey with large white wing patch.

The Blue-winged Pitta breeds in eastern India, south-western China and South East Asia. On migration and in winter it ranges south and east to the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Sulawesi and the Philippines. MacKinnon and Phillips 1993 (*The Birds of Borneo, Sumatra, Java and Bali*) doubts the validity of the previous Australian records. There are however two other Western Australian specimens: one found dead on Mandora in November 1927 and another found dead near Derby about November 1930 (Serventy, D.L. 1968. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 88: 160–162). The remains of one of these specimens is in the W.A. Museum. There is also a specimen in the University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge, collected on Christmas Island (Indian Ocean) on 14 December 1901.

Judging from these records it would appear that *Pitta moluccensis* is a rare non-breeding summer visitor to northern Australia from south-east Asia.

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