

## President's Address : The Most Useful Bird in Australia.

It is a little difficult to state dogmatically which is our most useful bird, but we can probably get somewhere near it, as the bird that should hold the premier place should be the one that does most good to the country in which it is found, and the least harm, both as to the amount of food it consumes and also as to its numbers. For instance, a bird may be very useful and yet scarce, consequently the total amount of insects it consumes is small, and even then many of those insects may not be injurious to man in any way. Birds that take fruit, even though it may only be for one month or less in the year, are held in disfavour by fruit-growers, although for the other eleven months they are devouring more or less destructive insects, and possibly without their aid it would be much more difficult to grow that fruit in the first instance or rear the young trees.

I consider the Straw-necked Ibis is by far our most useful bird, both as to its numbers, the amount of food it devours, and not being antagonistic to human interests. They are found more or less over the whole of Australia; their principal food consists of caterpillars, grasshoppers, fresh-water snails (which are often the host of the liver fluke), centipedes, scorpions, beetles, and yabbies. The amount consumed by each bird is very considerable, as from some I actually counted there were 2,410 young grasshoppers, 5 fresh-water snails, and several caterpillars, weighing  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ozs. That will give a little idea as to their immense utility.

In Queensland they are to be found in the sugar-cane fields, both devouring the grubs as they are turned up by the plough and also continually poking their long beaks about in likely hiding-places for beetles, which are so destructive to the sugar-cane. They also go in flocks, often of considerable size, and work over the ground together, and any young snakes they find up to about 6 inches in length are snapped up directly, and they probably help to keep these reptiles down more than any other bird, from their habit of turning over bits of bark or leaves to see what is underneath, and so discovering the hiding-place of any small reptile.

This bird is also held in high esteem in other countries. Take, for instance, Egypt. The ancient inhabitants of that country had a dreaded enemy in the locust, and the bird that helped them more than any other by devouring millions of these destructive insects was the Ibis, and it shows in what high esteem it was held by the Egyptians, when they regarded it as sacred, and frequently embalmed it after death.

Another bird which also destroys hosts of noxious insects is the Bustard or Plain-Turkey, but unfortunately they are very much sought after as an article of food, and are consequently getting more rare every year; therefore the total amount of good they do does not compare with that done by the Ibis.

The Pied Grallina or Magpie-Lark is another bird which lives

entirely on insects. It is fairly plentiful all over Australia, being usually found in the neighbourhood of water; but the class of insects it preys on is not so destructive to human interests as those the Ibis feeds on. For all that, it is a bird that should be rigorously protected. There is a large class of smaller birds, such as Flycatchers and others, that are good insect-destroyers and very helpful to farmers and fruit-growers, but they are too numerous to go through in detail now. Our friend the Laughing Jackass or Giant Kingfisher is held in high esteem by many, mostly because he kills a few snakes, but he is much addicted to eating eggs and young of far better insectivorous birds than himself, and also devours many lizards, which reptiles are splendid insect-destroyers, especially useful in catching moths, consequently this bird does not hold a high place in the list of those that are useful to mankind. Magpies, Butcher-Birds, Crows, and similar birds all have their good points, but they also have their bad ones. The Ibis has none, and I think easily holds the premier place as being the most useful bird, not only in Australia but also in the other countries where it is found. These birds should be rigorously protected, especially in preventing their nesting rookeries, where thousands of birds often congregate together, from being raided for the sake of their eggs, and a heavy penalty should be enacted for taking either the birds, their eggs, or young.

### Notes and Notices.

A HIGH AIM.—Before his cousin, Mr. Gregory M. Mathews, F.L.S., &c., completes his great work "The Coloured Figures of the Birds of Australia," Mr. H. L. White, Scone, New South Wales, hopes to possess for reference the eggs of every known Australian bird. Mr. White's oological collection now exceeds 700 species, chiefly through his enterprise in sending out competent collectors last season both to North-East and North-West Australia.

COLOURED FIGURE FUND.—The hon. treasurer A.O.U. reports that the donations to the Coloured Figure Fund for the year ending 30th June last were as follow :—W. J. T. Armstrong, 3s. ; F. L. Berney, 10s. ; Miss Brumby, 10s. ; H. Burrell, 8s. ; A. L. Butler, 2s. 6d. ; G. Graham, 5s. ; J. Greenway, 5s. ; R. C. M'Gregor, 1s. 10d. ; Thos. Tindale, 5s. ; H. L. White, £3 1s. 6d. ; and for the previous year the following should be acknowledged, namely :—W. V. Angove, 5s. ; Miss Brumby, 5s. ; G. Graham, 5s. ; T. Iredale, 10s. ; Colonel Legge, 10s. ; Thos. Tindale, 5s.

EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS OF MR. F. L. WHITLOCK TO MR. H. L. WHITE (*written during September, 1908, from near Marble Bar, Western Australia*).—Stones and spinifex! spinifex and stones! ranges of hills red with granite and glare, or else huge barren flats, with nothing but spinifex, creeks lined with stunted and prickly shrubs; the only relief,



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