

Report on Mutton-Bird Rookeries, Cape Wollomai.

BY A. J. AND A. G. CAMPBELL, Ms.R.A.O.U.

EGGING SEASON.

WE were camped on the Mutton-Bird rookeries, Cape Wollomai, from the 27th November to 4th December, 1912. Eggers were found far more numerous than on years of previous observations. On Sunday, 1st December, there were probably 200 persons on the rookeries, but many were merely sight-seers.

Towards the end of our stay many bird-burrows in different parts of the rookeries were examined and found to be empty—*i.e.*, birds had departed on account of their eggs having been taken. The important question is, Are these burrows tenanted again and eggs laid by the robbed bird or others? This can only be proved by some observers examining the rookeries again, say, about the end of December, or later. If the burrows are not again occupied, then, it is believed, the birds are greatly interfered with through excessive egging.

Again, there appeared to be no "glut" this season. (Hundreds of eggs are usually deposited upon the surface of the ground, through lack of unoccupied burrows.) This may have been caused by the great raiding during last (1911) season, when the number of eggers (owing chiefly to increased local population) was greatly increased, compared with former years, and last egging season was the heaviest known. The planting of marram grass has been successful in places, but the efforts to stay the largest sand-dunes have failed so far, the sand having moved much towards the rookeries since observations were last made. The fences placed to keep out sheep should have plain wire on the topmost rows, for the barbed wire now there is responsible for the entanglement and death of numerous birds.

Owing to the scientific interest and economic value of these Petrels (Mutton-Birds), they should be protected—at all events partially—by limiting the raiding by eggers during November, and especially birding in autumn. Referring to the previous reports and recommendations in *The Emu* (*vide* vol. ii., p. 195, and vol. viii., pp. 209–10, the following proposals are again suggested to the authorities:—

(1) That campers pay a nominal fee, as do those on the shores of Port Phillip Bay, or that a small toll per dozen be levied on eggs (or birds) collected.

(2) That the names and addresses of all visitors to the Cape Wollomai rookeries be registered, and, for statistical purposes, the numbers of eggs taken. (This plan was adopted as an experiment by Mr. C. W. Maclean, C.E., then Chief Inspector of Fisheries and Game, during the season of 1902, and worked well. Eggers and visitors registered their names at either Cowes or San Remo. The fact of having to register one's name appeared to keep away the "rough element"—persons who occasionally visit the rookeries "for sport.")

(3) That opening-up of burrows by removing earth or scrub be not permitted, as it causes sand-drift. If an egg cannot be withdrawn by ordinary egging-hook the burrow should be left intact.

(4) That no dogs be permitted on the rookeries (Dogs are a great nuisance in more ways than one.)

(5) That egging operations cease positively on the last day of November each season. (It has been found that, after the date mentioned, about 50 per cent. of eggs collected show signs of incubation, and are commercially worthless.)

(6) That the planting of marram grass be continued, especially on the "reserve" at the neck of the cape. (A good object-lesson in what might be done to prevent sand-drift is afforded on Mr. Cleeland's property, where marram grass planted four years ago is now well established. The major part of the reserve (over 200 acres) consists of moving sand-dunes, and these should be vigorously attacked by plantations of marram grass, particularly on the eastern fringe.)

BIRDING SEASON.*

We spent five days (23rd to 27th March, 1913) on the Cape Wollomai rookeries. The weather generally was unpropitious, but we were enabled between times to make ample observations regarding the state of the rookeries. The young birds were hardly grown enough for taking, but there was one party (four persons) camped, fishing, shooting, &c., which took away about 50 birds. A local fisherman also took a few.

There is no doubt that the whole of the Cape rookeries appear in a badly depleted state, presumably from over-raiding of recent years, capped by the last two seasons' great gatherings, including the heavy birding in April, 1912. Usually at the end of the egging season it is stated that, notwithstanding the amount of egging, a glut occurs—*i.e.*, numbers of eggs are deposited on the surface of the ground, under bushes, &c., there being no burrows to accommodate them. We were careful to remain till the end of last season (4th December), but no such glut occurred. This was the first observation that aroused our suspicion regarding the welfare of the birds. A second suspicion occurred this visit, after taking up our usual position to view the incoming birds at evening, when it was observed their numbers had greatly decreased. After all eggers had departed from the rookeries last November, we carefully surveyed the whole area of the Cape, testing burrows here and there, and found the majority empty through egging, and we particularly noted patches entirely devoid of birds.

It is popularly stated that Mutton-Birds return the same season to lay again, if robbed, or other birds take their place.

* This part of the report has been forwarded to Major Semmens, Chief Inspector of Fisheries and Game, Victoria, at his request.

This, we have proved to our satisfaction, is utterly incorrect, so far, at least, as the Cape rookeries are concerned. We had exceptionally good opportunities for examining the rookeries this birding season. First, recent showers of rain had obliterated all old marks, therefore the fresh tracks in and out of the burrows made by the parents going to feed their young were easily seen, and showed the burrows occupied. Second, early autumnal rains had caused a fresh growth of grass and weeds at the entrance of many burrows, therefore the empty ones could easily be detected. A methodical count proved that approximately 62 per cent. of the burrows were unoccupied, and were egged last season. Thus, our suspicions beforementioned were fully confirmed.

The following are the details of our counts :—

DETAILS OF COUNTS OF BURROWS * ON CAPE WOOLAMAI.

I.—From Red Point to main headland of Cape—

				Occupied.		Empty.
<i>a.</i>	Open, bare ground near Banksia trees	...	...	22	...	78
<i>b.</i>	Another, ditto	...	...	27	...	73
<i>c.</i>	Sword-grass sand-hill adjacent	...	...	53	...	47
<i>d.</i>	Ditto, not so dense	...	...	40	...	60

II.—On headland itself—

<i>a.</i>	Open patch north slope	...	...	29	...	71
<i>b.</i>	Another (old thistle bed)	...	...	26	...	74
<i>c.</i>	Open patch south side	...	...	18	...	82
<i>d.</i>	Among Scirpus tussocks	...	...	36	...	64
<i>e.</i>	Ditto	...	...	33	...	67
<i>f.</i>	Among Aster scrub	...	...	57	...	43

III.—In large marram area fenced in (south coast)—

<i>a.</i>	Pigface rookery	...	...	13	...	87
<i>b.</i>	Ice-plant rookery opposite	...	...	23	...	77
<i>c.</i>	Another of same	...	...	14	...	86
<i>d.</i>	Tussocky brow of cliffs	...	...	9	...	91
<i>e.</i>	Another	...	...	11	...	89
<i>f.</i>	Among grassy hills with scrub	...	...	74	...	26
<i>g.</i>	Ditto, near fence	...	...	56	...	44
<i>h.</i>	Another	...	...	51	...	49
<i>i.</i>	Scrub at head of Pigface Creek	...	...	62	...	38
<i>j.</i>	Another, ditto	...	...	58	...	42

IV.—West end of rookery on south coast—

<i>a.</i>	Open ground	...	...	22	...	78
<i>b.</i>	Among sword-grass	...	...	59	...	41
<i>c.</i>	Very thick sword-grass	...	...	91	...	9
				884		1,416

Of total of 2,300 burrows examined 38.4 per cent. only were occupied.

* The number of burrows to the square chain is 260. This average was obtained by six counts of separate plots each a chain square, selected in different but typical portions of the rookeries. Presuming that there were 200 acres of rookeries, in a full laying season there should be about 1,040,000 birds.

From the table it will be observed that in Area III. (*d* and *e*) the percentage of birds is small. This is a favourite rookery, open ground and easily raided, while in areas with scrub and sword-grass—notably Area IV. (*c*)—the percentage of birds is high, owing to the difficulty of roots and crooked burrows impeding eggers' hooks.

In view of the serious depletion of the Cape rookeries, it might be recommended (with the sanction of the part owner of the land) that that portion of the Cape headland enclosed by Mr. Cleeland's most southern barbed-wire paddock be strictly prohibited next season from both egging and birding. This area contains approximately 75 acres, and includes the favourite pigface (*Mesembrianthemum*) rookery, which is most easily raided, and, in consequence, the one we found most depleted.

Possibly the public would not object to any moderate restriction in favour of the birds, *their own sport and profit*. The birds require a rest. Egging has been carried on uninterruptedly, more or less, for the last 40 years. Another and a better recommendation would be to prohibit egging and birding every alternate year until the birds reassert their former numbers.

Notes on a Small Collection of Bird-Skins from the Northern Territory.

BY A. J. CAMPBELL AND J. A. KERSHAW, Ms. R.A.O.U.

THROUGH the courtesy of Mr. Atlee Hunt, C.M.G., Secretary Department of External Affairs, there has been placed at the disposal of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union a small collection of bird-skins for examination, and, for publication, the whole of Mr. G. F. Hill's ornithological field notes obtained during the Barclay Exploring Expedition through the Northern Territory. The Council of the Union deputed us to examine the birds, while Mr. Hill's field notes appear *in extenso*, beginning at p. 238.

The collection of skins (a few being in spirits) is small but interesting. There are 65 specimens, representing about 36 species. *Xerophila castaneiventris*, Milligan (Chestnut-bellied Whiteface) is new for the Northern Territory, likewise *Malurus coronatus*, Gould (Purple-crowned Wren). A female only of the latter was obtained, which appears darker in general colouration than Gould's figure ("Birds of Australia," Suppl., pl. 20).

The bird of most interest is a Grass-Wren new to science, which we have named *Amytornis rufa*. The following is its description:—

Adult Male.—Upper surface rich rufous, each feather from head to mantle, including upper wing coverts, having a white central stripe; line of black from gape, extending backward about half an inch; ear coverts dark, striped with white; throat whitish; rest of under surface buffy, darkest on flanks, which



Campbell, Archibald James and Campbell, Archibald George. 1913. "Report on Mutton-Bird Rookeries, Cape Wollomai." *The Emu : official organ of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union* 12(4), 271–274.

<https://doi.org/10.1071/MU912271>.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1071/MU912271>

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