FLAME ROBIN SURVEY

John Ipsen and Pauline Reilly.

This preliminary report on Flame Robins (Petroica phoenicea) is necessarily incomplete but is given so that others may know what is being undertaken and perhaps furnish further information.

The movements or altitudinal migrations of Flame Robins have proved interesting, since the discovery - through banding- that individual birds return to exactly the same area for their winter foraging. It is generally accepted that a bird - or for that matter any animal - will return to its birthplace if left to its own devices. This return to the nesting area each year for the purpose of raising the new brood and then departing to some place (loosely defined as lower altitude or warmer clime) has readily been accepted. Bird students know just how specific an area can be for the individual bird to select as its nesting site each year.

Nevertheless, it is surprising to find a bird like the Flame Robin banded at its winter feeding ground, returning year after year to the same few acres of cleared paddock - this, after travelling perhaps 100 miles for nesting. In the case of birds crossing Bass Strait to Tasmania, this could be 200 miles or more.

So far, in only two years of banding at Bendigo, covering three winters, several birds banded in 1962 were recovered during the winter of 1963. This winter (1964), one bird from 1962 was recovered - not one of the birds recovered during the 1963 winter. Quite a few birds banded in the Bendigo area early in the season show a tendency to remain there.

This suggests that Flame Robins travel to an area, such as a cleared field, and then stop, remaining there for the winter. Why? It would seem logical for the birds to travel on to new areas as feeding conditions dictated. This does not appear to be so. Is this a territorial necessity to prevent the bulk of birds from drifting into one area, overcrowding some parts and neglecting other good feeding grounds?

What is the direction of migration? We know through past observations that the birds nest in all the mountain regions in Eastern Victoria and coastal Southern Victoria. They have occasionally been known to nest inland as at Kingower Hills, near Inglewood, although such extreme cases are just incidental and not at all general.

How far inland do the birds travel during the winter?

The Bass Strait birds appear at the end of March each year in Victorian coastal regions. They appear in numbers in Southern N.S.W. in June. Are these the same birds? Is there a leap-frogging pattern? Or do the Southern birds stop in Victoria and cause the Victorian birds to travel up North?

On French Island this year in May, there appeared to be a large population of Flame Robins. One month later, a search over a wide area produced only a dozen birds. In July a few more birds were present and, in several instances, these were in pairs. Do Flame Robins form pairs months before the breeding season? Unfortunately gale force winds precluded any chance of banding for a possible follow-up by retraps.

All these questions we hope to answer in time after a concerted banding effort, summer and winter, in as many areas as possible. In the meantime, if any bander has any information he/she is willing to share, this will be most gratefully accepted and acknowledged. A note to either of the authors of this paper would be appreciated.

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RECAPTURE OF FAIRY MARTIN.

On 6.11.60 I banded a number of Fairy Martins (Hylochelidon ariel) on Mr. Dowling's farm at Bandon Grove.

In a recent letter, Mr. Dowling informs me that on the morning of 4.10.64 he caught a Fairy Martin at its nest on the river bank which had a ring on its leg. On examination it proved to be a bird I had banded 4 years previously as a fledgling in the nest.

The band number is 010-21617, and the bird was captured in the same area in which it had been banded.

L.Courtney Haines, Sydney.