

Further Notes On White-backed Swallows And Rainbow-birds

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Projects are being carried out by the authors on White-backed Swallows (*Cheramoeca leucosterna*) and Rainbow-birds (*Merops ornatus*) near Gawler, South Australia, and in the vicinity of Narrandera, New South Wales. Additional interesting observations are recorded.

In the South Australian project area both species of birds burrow and colonise the rather steep sandy banks along some of the country roads. In addition, the Rainbow-birds occasionally burrow in river banks. At Narrandera, the Rainbow-birds frequent similar habitats but the White-backed Swallows prefer the cliff-like banks along the Murrumbidgee River and seldom nest along the roads. The methods used for trapping these species were outlined by Lane (1963) and Waterman (1965 a,b). These methods are still being employed successfully at both locations.

On a number of occasions up to 19 White-backed Swallows have been found in a burrow containing eggs or naked nestlings of that species, and as many as 27 fully fledged birds have been trapped from the one burrow at one time. This seems to indicate that any White-backed Swallows in the vicinity of a burrow at dusk may roost there for the night even though the burrow may be occupied by a breeding pair of birds. This is further confirmed by the fact that adult birds have been retrapped at burrows up to five miles away several days later. (See Recovery Round-up, page 20.) In some cases the burrows from which these birds were trapped and retrapped contained eggs or nestlings. It would be interesting to find out if the first brood of an adult pair occupy the burrow until the end of the breeding season even though the parents may produce a second brood.

On 19 December 1966 while trapping Rainbow-birds and White-backed Swallows north of Adelaide, South Australia, we were amazed to find in one burrow 18 fully fledged White-backed Swallows, and a pair of Rainbow-birds with four almost naked nestlings. No birds were present in another burrow four feet away. Three nights later the site was again visited and on this occasion no swallows were found in the burrow which was



Trapping White-backed Swallows at night. The uppermost bird is near the burrow entrance.

Photo: M. Melvin

still occupied by both adult Rainbow-birds and nestlings. However, the other burrow four feet

Additional Longevity Records

The Secretary, Australian Bird Banding Scheme has forwarded the following interesting longevity note which is reprinted from *New Scientist*, 7 September 1967. (See also Recent Literature p. 16.)

GULL THAT LIVED 36 YEARS

"A Herring Gull found dead by a bunch of sharp-eyed Girl Guides on the shores of Lake Michigan is reckoned to have set up a new world record for longevity in a wild bird. A ring on its foot showed that it had lived for 36 years. The record seems to be a 'copper-bound' fact. Dr Olin Pettingill, director of the internationally known Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University recalls going ashore at Duck Rock off the coast of Maine on 29 June 1930, and ringing 19 Herring Gulls when they were only ten-day-old chicks.

"The girls found the dead bird recently in Little Traverse Bay, near Petoskey in lower Michigan. One of them noticed the numbered copper tag on the bird's leg and mailed it, as directed to the Biological Survey, Washington, D.C. Pettingill is reported to be excited by the news that his chick came home to its last roost more than three decades after he released it, hopefully. In those days he was a newcomer to what has now become a thriving bird business.

away contained 27 adult swallows, including five which had been banded in the Rainbow-birds' burrow three nights previously.

It appears that, as dusk approaches, White-backed Swallows will seek a communal roost in any convenient burrow. It is surprising, however, that a pair of Rainbow-birds with nestlings will permit such intrusion of their nesting burrow.

References

- Lane, S. G. (1963). 'Notes on Banding Rainbow-birds', *Bird Bander*, 1: 59-61.
 Waterman, M. H. (1965a). 'Notes on the Rainbow-bird in South Australia', *Aust. Bird Bander*, 3: 49.
 Waterman, M. H. (1965b). 'Note on the White-backed Swallow', *Aust. Bird Bander*, 3:53.

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"The fact that this bird had moved far inland from its coastal birthplace is noteworthy," he told the New York Zoological Society, "and the fact that it died within a few miles of the University of Michigan Biological Station where I was teaching in 1930 is a curious coincidence. What is extraordinary is that the gull lived for 36 years."

"As far as a representative of the Ringing and Migration Section of the British Trust for Ornithology can recall, the oldest British Herring Gull record is a bird that lived for 14 years and ten months. It was his impression that another bird of the same species had been found by German ornithologists, ringed, showing that it had survived for 31 years and 11 months.

"How long a bird lives, he pointed out, depends on many things, particularly size. The life span of one old resilient curlew is recorded as 31 years and 6 months; a Black-headed Gull lived more than 30 years and wild song birds are known to survive, very infrequently, for about 16 years. In captivity, free from the hazards of life in the wild, the picture is different. A captive Eagle Owl died at 68 and an Andean Condor at 65. Goldie of the London Zoo (who is about ten) might still be escaping in the year 2000. A sad footnote to the Michigan story is that when she heard the news the girl who found the Herring Gull said: 'Gee, do you suppose the old guy who banded that bird is still alive?'"

Longevity records in Australia are still almost in their infancy. A Black-browed Albatross found dead over 13 years after banding (see Recovery Round-up p. 18) is the oldest recorded in the ABBS, while the oldest Silver Gull was found more than 10 years 6 months after banding (see Recovery Round-up p. 19). Dr Serventy has recaptured Short-tailed Shearwaters on their breeding islands 18 years after they had been banded as breeding adults (see Vol. 4, p. 13). These birds were banded prior to the commencement of the ABBS with bands provided by the Tasmanian Animals and Birds Protection Board.