Measurements, Weights and Notes on Pied Currawongs

J. S. ROBERTSON

In winter 1968, there were Pied Currawongs (*Strepera graculina*) about the Wellington Point area (Queensland) from mid April to early July. They have appeared here in five of the last seven winters, but not at other seasons. This was the longest of their visits but some of these have been of very short duration. This year as many as 70 Currawongs were counted as they straggled past about sunrise, flying north on their daily visit to feed on the large fruit on the Moreton Bay Figtrees (*Ficus macrophylla*) which grow in the small park at the tip of Wellington Point.

Later in the day the birds explored all feeding possibilities in the area. The Currawongs found the local strawberry crop very much to their liking and consequently many of these birds were shot by the farmers. Our property, too, was thoroughly gone over by parties of Currawongs. During these visits they made much use of our bird bath to assist them to dispose of indigestible or unwanted matter they had swallowed. At times, up to five Currawongs would stand on the three-feet diameter bird bath and take many sips of water. Presently, one or another bird would hold its head high and manipulate its neck until a pellet, half the size of my finger, would be regurgitated and deposited either in the water or nearby; these consisted mainly of seeds and the harder parts of seed pods. The Currawongs soon noticed the local honeyeater flock drinking nearby in my feeder trap (see Robertson, 1964 and 1966) and investigated it, too. The sugar and water mixture seemed to appeal to them and soon they crowded in to drink there. The trap chamber is only 18 inches long by 15 inches wide by 12 inches high with door openings of 10 by 15 inches at each end. Sometimes three Currawongs would try to crowd in at once. Often some cunning rascal would stand on the door sill and reach its head in to the feeding tray, or even stand astride with one foot in and one foot out of the trap. Such tactics prevented the drop doors closing fully on them when the release string was pulled so that they could wriggle out under the door. When the trap was being designed there was no thought of using it for such large birds. Nevertheless 16 of the Currawongs were caught in this honeyeater feeder trap and banded. It was a surprise on one occasion to catch two of them simultaneously; this event really tested the holding capacity of the locking bars on the doors.

The handhole in the trap is at the top of a side wall so that the initial hand grip on the Currawongs was across the back. The hand was sheathed in a nine by nine inches stout cloth bag which provided loose edges for the bird to attack. No banded birds were seen to re-visit our garden.

The actual banding of the birds was relatively simple as for this only one leg needs to be extracted from the stout holding bag. Their bills and claws made real difficulties during the weighing and measuring of the size details summarised in Table 1. A makeshift hood for their heads was contrived from an old canvas-topped gymnasium boot. A large safety pin was used to restrict the ankle opening of the canvas upper so that when the bootlacing was tightened the bird would not be able to extract its head. Unfortunately, before this contraption could be tried out the whole flock vanished.

As is usual, after handling an unfamiliar bird, reference was made to various published descriptions of them to consolidate the observations of their markings. The very obvious white patch in the wing, so apparent in flight, is described by G. M. Mathews (1922) as '. . . the primary quills white at the base, both on the outer and inner webs . . .'. For the same thing A. J. North (1901)

states '. . . bases of the primaries white . . .'. Neither of these authorities mentions the similar white bases of the secondaries which were so noticeable on the birds banded here.

Attempts were then made on the next birds banded to record further details by counting the number of both primaries and secondaries carrying this white, and also by measuring the extent of it. The progressive increase in the data recorded shows in the details listed in Table 2; these are intended rather to be indicative than precise. Incidentally, this procedure made very clear the difficulties referred to by D. M. Snow (1967) of positively identifying each primary and secondary which tallying is an essential part of the field study of moult.

To assist in assessing the relative importance of the observation of the white in the secondaries, contact was made with the Queensland Museum. Mr Don Vernon of the Museum Staff kindly looked over the skins held in the collection and found that these, too, showed white in the secondaries in the same general way.

It was proposed to collect a specimen of the Pied Currawong, which is classified as Pest Fauna in Queensland, but the flock had moved on by the time this decision was made. The best that could be done was to obtain the wings from two dead birds, dangling over a strawberry patch where a farmer had hung them from poles as scares. One pair of these wings was delivered to the Queensland Museum on 30 July 1968. The extent of the white was measured on another of these typical wings after plucking some of the under-wing coverts to expose the base of each quill as suggested by Snow (1967). In each case the white commences at the bottom of the vane and continues without gaps until the black section is encountered. The lengths, listed in Table 2, were measured on the ventral surface along the feather shaft on its trailing edge side. There is no doubt that it is easier to count and measure quills on a dead bird. With the live banded bird the prime necessity to release the bird quite undamaged makes quill counting and measuring a difficult, single-handed job; the offensive potential of Pied Currawongs increases the interest even when the birds are shrouded with stout cloth.

The banding of Pied Currawongs appears to have been done mostly on winter flocks as reported in *The Australian Bird Bander* by Derek Stone at Timbertop, Vic., 1:68; J. E. Walsh, Mittagong, N.S.W., 3:53; P. D. Strong, Austinmer, N.S.W., 4:3; and Mrs R. E. Vellenga, Leura, N.S.W., 4:6. There seems to be little information about these birds in the summer, though Stone refers to them as having 'gone up in the mountains for the summer'.

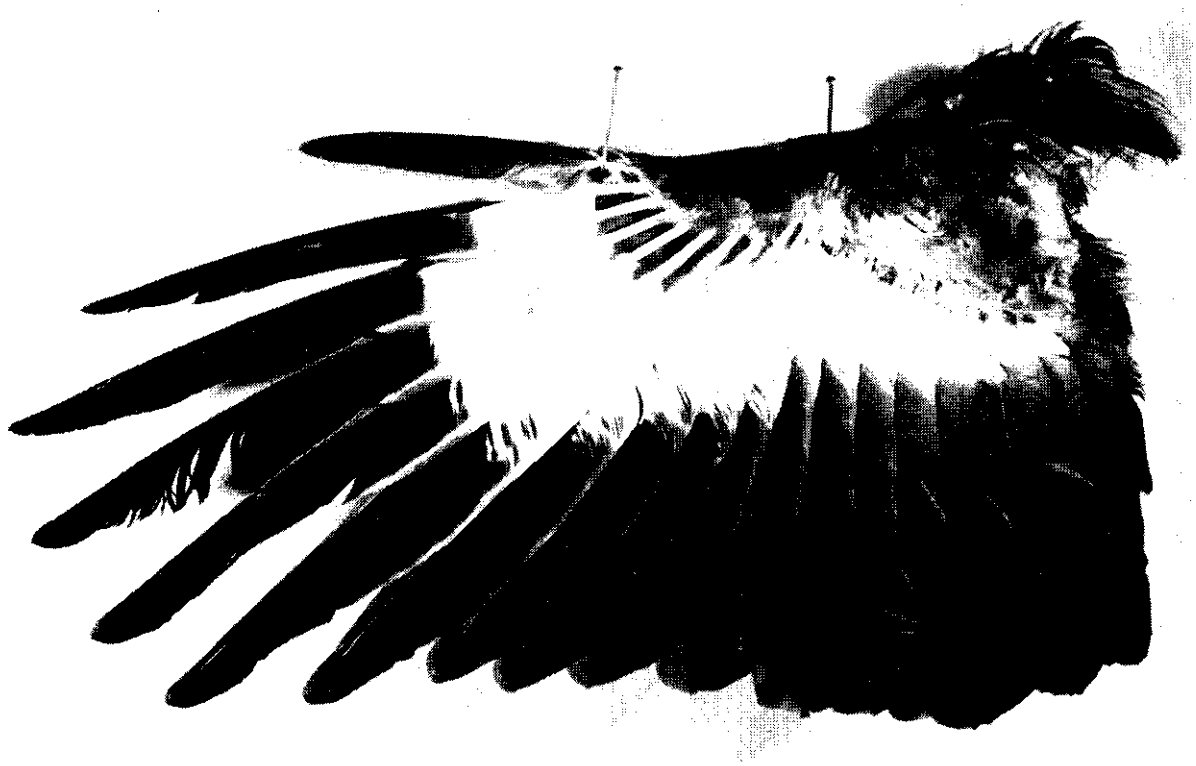
For our Wellington Point area 'the mountains' could well mean the McPherson Ranges on the Queensland/New South Wales border, as these are the highest and most extensive mountains hereabout. My visits to Binna Burra in these mountains have been mainly in the summer and my field books record Pied Currawongs as seen there on 25 February 1943; 1 February 1944, a flock; November 1944, flock about the Lodge, nest with two well-grown young; 28 November 1948, flock; 5 December 1948, fledgling beside nest; 22 June 1953, birds about Lodge (that is my only winter visit). The report of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union Campout at Binna Burra in October (1947) sets out details including 'common and nesting'. Unfortunately, while these field note references do show the Pied Currawongs as present and breeding at Binna Burra in various summers, they do not give any comparison with the winter populations there.

I am grateful to Mr H. J. de S. Disney of the Australian Museum, Sydney, for helpful comments made during the preparation of these notes.

TABLE 1

Measurements and Weight

Band Number	Length (mm)	Wing (mm)	Wingspan (mm)	Weight (grms)
090-69404	460	—	750	292
-69405	450	—	735	297
-69406	442	—	720	239
-69407	460	—	740	277
-69408	482	255	780	317
-69409	460	252	730	289
-69410	440	235	720	254
-69412	465	—	705	277
-69413	480	253	740	317
-69414	455	250	730	269
-69415	455	245	720	222
-69416	465	240	725	240
-69417	450	225	725	254
-69418	450	240	725	265
-69419	460	250	—	275
-69420	475	260	770	317
Average	459	246	734	275
Minimum	440	225	705	222
Maximum	482	260	780	317
No. of birds	16	11	15	16



Ventral view of Pied Currawong's wing (opened out) showing the white on the primaries and secondaries. The underwing coverts have been removed.

Photo: C. V. Turner, by courtesy of The Australian Museum

TABLE 2
Wing Colour, etc.
Live Banded Birds

Band Number 090-	
69408/12	Bases of all primary and secondary flight quills — white.
69414	Primaries and secondaries have approximately basal third white.
69416	Nine primaries and seven secondaries all have white on basal portions.
69417	Ten primaries show white bases as do nine secondaries from 50 mm on No. 1 to 10 mm on No. 9.
69418	Ten primaries show white bases to 90 mm maximum; nine secondaries show white from 50 mm on No. 1 to 10 mm on No. 9.
69420	Ten primaries show white bases to 80 mm maximum; eleven secondaries show white from 50 mm on No. 1 to 10 mm on No. 11.

The count of secondaries is approximate only.

The iris was consistently bright golden yellow; some gapes were booked as pink, others as yellow, but no clear reason for this difference was apparent.

Dead Bird

Primaries; numbered outwards from secondaries. No. 1/45 mm of white; 2/45 mm; 3/57 mm; 4/67 mm; 5/75 mm; 6/70 mm; 7/57 mm; 8/54 mm; 9/40 mm; 10/8 mm of white.

Secondaries; numbered inwards from primaries. No. 1/43 mm of white; 2/42 mm; 3/38 mm; 4/33 mm; 5/28 mm; 6/23 mm; 7/18 mm; 8/14 mm; 9/5 mm; 10 no white.

References

Mathews, G. M. (1922), *"The Birds of Australia"*, 10: 407.

North, A. J. (1901), *"Nests and Eggs of Birds Found Breeding in Australia"*, 1:8.

Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (1947), "Birds of the 1947 Queensland Camp-out at Binna Burra, Qld.", *Emu*, 47: 373.

Robertson, J. S. (1964), "Feeding Honeyeaters", *Aust. Bird Bander*, 2: 107-109.

Robertson, J. S. (1966), "Honeyeater Size Variation", *Aust. Bird Bander*, 4: 50-52.

Snow, D. W. (1967), "A Guide to Moult in British Birds", British Trust for Ornithology, Field Guide, No. 11.

J. S. Robertson,
Waterloo Street,
Wellington Point, Qld.

Collecting Insects Ectoparasitic on Birds

S. G. LANE

Banders have a unique opportunity to assist the work being carried out in the study of ectoparasites found on birds. These are parasites which inhabit the exterior of the host's body (endoparasites inhabit the interior) and the following are some of the groups which may be found on birds:

- Louse Flies *(Hippoboscidae)*
- Fleas *(Siphonaptera)*
- Ticks *(Ixodidae)*
- Bird Lice *(Mallophaga)*
- Leeches *(Hirundinidae)*

Louse Flies are the most commonly recognised group of avian ectoparasites. Julian Ford (1966) indicated some of the host species of these flies. Those listed by him were Galah *(Kakatoe roseicapilla)*, Tawny Frogmouth *(Podargus strigoides)*, Owlet-Nightjar *(Aegotheles cristata)*, Kookaburra *(Dacelo gigas)*, White-backed Swallow *(Cheramoeca leucosterna)*, Fairy Martin *(Hylochelidon ariel)*, Southern Emu-Wren *(Stipiturus malachurus)*, and Yellow-plumed Honeyeater *(Meliphaga ornata)*.

S. J. Paramonov (1951) stated that the family Hippoboscidae was poorly represented in Australian collections. At that time, very little bird banding was being carried out in Australia except waterfowl and shearwaters. Even since the advent of the Australian Bird-banding Scheme in 1953, relatively few specimens have been collected and much of the information has not been recorded, mainly due to the difficulty of catching these insects and consequently considerable data has been lost.

In addition to those listed by Ford, I have found Louse Flies on the following species:

* Rufous Fantail *(Rhipidura rufifrons)*
Southern Yellow Robin *(Eopsaltria australis)*
Rufous Whistler *(Pachycephala rufiventris)*
* Olive Whistler *(P. olivacea)*
Grey Shrike-Thrush *(Colluricincla harmonica)*
* Magpie-Lark *(Grallina cyanoleuca)*
* White-browed Scrub-Wren *(Sericornis frontalis)*
Striated Thornbill *(Acanthiza lineata)*
Brown Thornbill *(A. pusilla)*
Speckled Warbler *(Chthonicola sagittata)*
Blue Wren *(Malurus cyaneus)*
Variegated Wren *(M. lamberti)*
* Eastern Silvereye *(Zosterops lateralis)*
Eastern Spinebill *(Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris)*
Fuscous Honeyeater *(Meliphaga fusca)*
Yellow-faced Honeyeater *(M. chrysops)*
Yellow-tufted Honeyeater *(M. melanops)*
* New Holland Honeyeater *(Meliornis novaehollandiae)*
Bell Miner *(Manorina melanophrys)*
Beautiful Firetail *(Zonaeginthus bellus)*
Red-browed Finch *(Aegintha temporalis)*
Black-backed Magpie *(Gymnorhina tibicen)*

*Specimens forwarded to the Australian Museum.