

GENERAL NOTES

The family name of the Australian Honey-eaters.—The honey-eaters were known for almost one hundred years under the name Meliphagidae, based on the name of the oldest genus (*Meliphaga* Lewin, 1898, type *M. chrysotis* Lewin). Around 1920, Mathews discovered that a genus of insects had previously been named *Melophagus* (1802). He therefore rejected the name *Meliphaga*, replaced it by the next older name, *Ptilotis* (1837) and rejected the name Meliphagidae in favor of a family name based on the second oldest generic name in the family (*Melithreptus*, 1816), and called the honey-eaters Melithreptidae (Birds of Australia, 11: 237). By this action he committed a double blunder. First, it is not admissible to alter the typical genus of a family. Thus, if the name *Meliphaga* had really been preoccupied, a new family name would have had to be created with *Ptilotis* as its root. However, the name *Meliphaga* is by no means preoccupied by *Melophagus*, according to the International Rules, and the whole disturbing change of name was entirely unnecessary. By letter, I called Mr. Mathews's attention to this matter, and he corrected his error in 1931 (Ibis, ser. 13, 1: 47). Australian workers fortunately have never adopted the erroneous name Melithreptidae. It has, however, crept into a number of general works on birds, including the Zoological Record for 1941 and 1942. May this note speed the restoration of the correct name Meliphagidae for the Australian Honey-eaters.—E. MAYR, *American Museum of Natural History, New York, N. Y.*

The Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) (Plate 18, upper figure).—In 1937 we spent one long and lucky day (October 8) watching and collecting from a great concentration of these jaegers as, almost at our masthead, they preyed on Common Terns off Steveston Breakwater near Vancouver, B. C. During other years we have had less remarkable chances to watch their work in the same locality during the autumn flight. The following somewhat unrelated points of behavior and morphology are perhaps worth discussing.

(1) *The bill.*—Few writers manage to mention jaegers without emphasizing the "hawk-like" character and savage or bloodthirsty temperament, usually with special reference to the form of the bill. The latter, as compared to the pure larid type, is indeed hawk-like, designed to pierce as well as tear, and impressive enough in a dry skin. But the peculiar fact is that on fresh specimens of all ages the upper mandible is so weakly flexible that it can easily be bent up to right angles, and so soft that a needle and thread slips easily through almost any part of it! It is a question whether it could wound the least protected part of a tern, while as an effective weapon against *Larus philadelphia* or any *Rissa*, not to mention *Larus brachyrhynchus*, which we have once or twice seen attacked off the Spanish Banks, outside Vancouver Harbor, it would be quite ineffective.

(2) *The use of the feet.*—No less ridiculously ineffective are the feet. This is evident in handling 'winged' birds which, even in the ecstasy of fear, can exert only the feeblest pressure, or in watching hurt or gorged birds swim. With obviously great effort they barely propel themselves through the water at visible speed. Adaptive economy—the sacrifice of everything to one astounding faculty, agility and speed in flight—has not produced structural modifications equivalent to those of terns, swallows, or swifts, but is travelling the same road.

(3) *The predatory technique.*—Hence the beautiful and bewildering character of the jaeger's attack. When two gulls quarrel or when an eagle robs an osprey

the bodies are, for the crucial moment, in fixed relation while blows are exchanged, often with feathers flying from the point of impact. In the smothering whirl of the jaeger's assault there is no pause, feathers do not fly, there is little or no punctuation of blows. The point is that the jaeger, with its bewildering aerobatics, *smothers the flight* of the victim, renders it helpless, flightless, terrified. Psychological warfare plays a large part in bird behavior, and the jaeger's is no more deadly than the formal combats so often tied into territorial activities. Evidently the only records of jaegers' killings are of song birds or small shore birds on the arctic breeding grounds. We have never been able to detect the delivery of any blow that was not vague, indefinable, neither definitely with bill, feet, or wings, but rather mere interference with flight. The non-lethal, perhaps in large part psychological, character of the jaeger's power makes it comprehensible that, on the breeding grounds, as in several instances cited by Bent, the power might be neutralized when the smaller bird possessed the incentive of nest defense.

The average pattern of combat as we have seen it is a series of downward loops, the ensuing rises short at first, then long, like a pitchfork with alternate short tines. The jaeger's first attack, from above, forces the tern down or so interrupts its flight as to cause it to fall. During the fall the jaeger flashes around and below, halting the drop and causing a short rise. This may be oft-repeated, but more or less alternately the tern escapes farther upward. The surrender of the food morsel may occur at any point. On October 8 the fish being taken were Sand Lance (*Ammodytes personatus*) and a small herring, *Culpea pallasii*. We owe the identifications to Dr. Clements of the Nanaimo Biological Station.

(4) *The foot-markings*.—It is a long jump from such matters to the pattern of the feet during immaturity, but this, owing doubtless to its disappearance in a dried skin, seems not to have been described in detail, and its history is peculiar. The photograph shows it well. The pallid-bluish to cold flesh-colored area is at a minimum in the youngest birds represented in the autumn flight. The edge of the dark area recedes, the light area invades the foot progressively with the lighter plumages, whatever ages they may represent; whether gradually throughout the long period or by abrupt stages with the molts, no man, it is safe to say, can tell. There is promise of the achievement of an all-light adult foot and shank. On the contrary, while sporadic latero-ventral speckling still betrays departing immaturity, black scutellar pigment comes flooding back, the long correlation is broken, the color of earliest immaturity is restored, though the black is much more intense. Abrupt change to a strong and permanent color with the first prenuptial molt is, of course, the rule rather than the exception, but rarely if ever with so curious and contradictory a preliminary history. The true scutellae of the toes and the soft skin of the webbing seem to be affected alike. Whether the pallid coloration is pigmentary or merely the native hue of blood and tissue we do not know, but the latter seems probable, in which case we have the phenomenon of a long-continued withdrawal of the pigmentary frontier during the early years, followed by a total invasion on the threshold of maturity.—T. T. McCABE, *Berkeley, California*; KENNETH RACEY, *Vancouver, B. C.*

A peculiar injury to a Robin (*Plate 18, lower figure*).—The mortality among birds from accidental impact is probably very large, for whenever such delicate structures are in any way seriously damaged there seems but little chance for their survival. It is a matter of considerable surprise, therefore, when we find a bird which has