

FRAGMENTARY NOTES ON BIRD LIFE IN THE FIJIS

By W. J. BELCHER

Pluvialis dominicus fulvus. Golden Plover. A few notes from my personal observations of the Golden Plover in Fiji may throw some light on the migratory movements of this regular visitor. On September 16, 1926, while driving along the road in the Suva district, I observed a large flock of Plover, about 40 or 50, flying inland and very low. Just as they reached a position over the road, one of their number suddenly fell from the flock in an exhausted condition. It was so completely fatigued that it could not rise again, but feebly ran along the road before the motor and could easily have been captured. After a few minutes the weary little traveler regained sufficient strength to fly feebly another twenty yards or so, and again it dropped in the adjoining field. The above facts suggest the termination of a long and weary flight from some great distance overseas.

Plover continued plentiful on the inland flats and grassy uplands during the succeeding seven months, until April 8 to 12, when I observed large numbers feeding on the Rewa flats, about 15 miles inland. They were feeding on open grass fields and on newly plowed cane fields. Many of the birds were in full breeding plumage, with the broad black streak extending from the throat down the center of the breast to the abdomen. I visited the same locality again a week later, April 19, and every Plover had departed. During frequent visits in May, June and July, not a sign of the Golden Plover has been seen. These observations might suggest that this transient spends 7 months in the Sunny South Sea isles and 5 months in the colder climes of the north, approximately. Snipe were quite plentiful in Fiji several weeks after the departure of the Plover. I have taken Snipe and Plover in November, Godwit in December, and a Bristle-thighed Curlew in July.

Some of my readers may be interested to compare notes on the dates of the arrival and departure of the Plover in Fiji with dates of arrival and departure from Siberia or Alaska, as far as is known.

Acridotheres tristis. Indian Mynah (introduced). This impudent immigrant has increased to such an extent in recent years, that it is now looked upon in Fiji as a common pest. Especially is this so during its breeding season in November and December, when kitchen stove-pipes almost daily become choked with dried grass, paper, rags, and all kinds of rubbish, due to their persistent attempts at nest building. At my residence in Suva, so persistent were these birds, that it was found necessary to wire on a piece of fine wire-netting to prevent their entry down the funnel. The following morning, hearing a considerable commotion up above, I went out and was much amused to see the two would-be home-builders, in very angry mood, clinging to the netting, pushing with their feet, and pulling at the wire with the beak, in a vain attempt to pull down the barrier.

The Mynah is evidently just as greedy for money as his inseparable companion the Hindu. When removing an old hut, I had occasion to pull down a nest of the Mynah from under the roof. This nest was unusually large for such a small bird, and would have filled a wheel-barrow to over-flowing with rubbish, rags, sticks, etc. Among other things, I found a 5/- Treasury paper note, built into the nest, probably picked up from the roadside.

On another occasion, November 25, 1926, I examined a Mynah nest near Suva, which was built in the top of the funnel of a big steam roller, which had been laid off for a few weeks. This nest contained six beautiful blue eggs. When blown, it was found that three of these eggs were positively fresh and newly laid, whilst the remaining three were in an advanced state of incubation! This seems to point to the fact that,

like the domesticated fowl, two different birds will sometimes make use of the same nest.

One bright morning, about 7 A. M., I was checked in my walk by seeing a Mynah-bird alight on the road a few yards ahead of me, carrying a blue egg of its own species, which had a puncture in the shell, which enabled the bird to hold it in its bill. As I watched, the impudent fellow coolly made a meal by extracting the yolk, and flew off. Whether this meal was the proceeds of a daylight robbery, or a case of "birth control", I had no means of ascertaining.

The Mynah is well known for its pugilistic proclivities and, as a case in point, I here mention one of many bitter quarrels that I have witnessed. On the morning of May 20, I observed four Mynah-birds, in pairs, engaged in deadly combat. They were rolling about in the center of the roadway, firmly locked together with talon and beak. They were so serious about their dispute, that they took little notice of my approach until I got to within ten feet of them. Then they disengaged and with some difficulty flew off. The large white patches on the wings of two of the birds were saturated crimson with blood.

Chrysoenas luteovirens. Golden Fruit Dove. While in the forest at Colo-i-suva, on Viti-levu, November 30, I was attracted to a spot near a stream, by the "barking" call of a male Golden Dove. These charming little doves, with their bright golden lanceolated plumage, so closely resemble the yellow decaying leaves of the forest that it is almost impossible to locate them until they "bark" or move. After locating the bird in question, I discovered an exceedingly fragile "nest", or more correctly speaking a platform, composed of about half a dozen frail twigs carelessly laid cross-wise on a fork of a slender branch. Poised precariously on these, was one solitary white egg, rather long and pointed at both ends. Due to its contents it appeared to be faintly pink.

The position of the "nest" was cunningly chosen, overhanging a ravine, and well-nigh impossible to reach. During my attempt to secure the egg, by carefully pulling down the branch, it unfortunately rolled off its platform and crashed. It was partly incubated. An observer has good cause to wonder how the egg of the little fruit dove retains its precarious position on such a frail platform during the swaying of the branches on a windy day!

Strix lulu. White Owl. On April 9, 1927, when out in the country, 4½ miles from Suva, I was shown a nest of the White Owl (native Lulu). It was situated in the hollow of an "ivi" tree, a Fiji chestnut. In the bottom of the hole were five large dirty white eggs, almost the size of those of a young domesticated fowl. When washed, however, the eggs were of a clean white, but not of a glossy surface. When taken home and blown, some of the eggs were found to be in a much more advanced state of incubation than others. Two of the embryos were well formed, while in the others, the change had barely commenced.

About two weeks later, I was in the same locality and, out of curiosity, sent a Fijian boy up the tree to examine the nest, when to my surprise he reported five new eggs replacing those previously taken away! On this second occasion, I did not molest them, and I trust that the family was successfully reared.

Strix lulu does not appear to utter any night-cry or call note, the only sound emitted being what I can best describe as a wheezy hiss. During my five years' experience, I have never observed a "Lulu" in the forest during the full daylight hours, as is so often the case with the New Zealand "More-pork." On the outskirts of the forest he appears after sundown, in slow and silent flight.

Suva, Fiji, August 30, 1927.