

Notes on the Birds of Grootte Eylandt,
Gulf of Carpentaria.

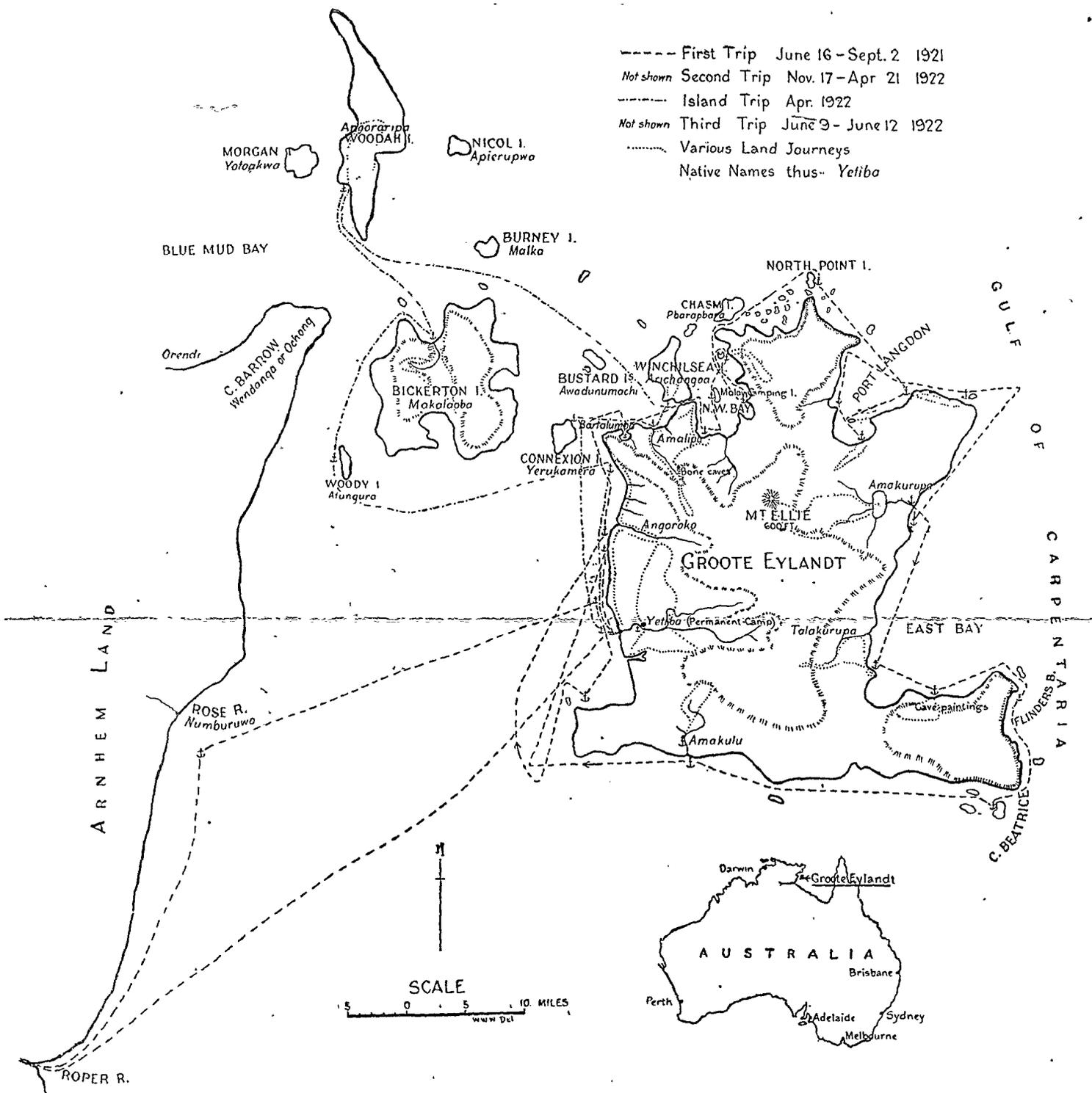
By Norman B. Tindale.

During 1921-2 the writer spent twelve months on and around Grootte Eylandt in field work, paying special attention to entomology. A collection of birds was also made, and, through the courtesy of Dr. A. M. Morgan, who has identified them, and Mr. J. Sutton, who has kindly compiled a list of the species, the writer is able to give some notes on the bird life of the island. Mr. W. McLennan collected birds on the island during the early portion of the writer's stay there, and many of the species here noted have already been recorded from his takings by Messrs. H. L. White* and T. D. Campbell.†

Grootte Eylandt is approximately 900 square miles in area, and distant about thirty miles from the west coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria; but is connected with the mainland by a chain of islands. The island is densely wooded, and fertile in comparison with the mainland. Its highest point is Mount Ellie, about 600 feet in elevation, and probably the highest point in the whole of the Gulf country.

The localities given are in each case, except Port Langdon (named by Flinders in 1803), the native names of the places.

*"The Emu," XXI, 1922, p. 163. †*Ibid.*, pp. 188-97.



GROOTE EYLANDT.

[See Article on Page 10 by Mr. Norman B. Tindale.]

Most of the records are from Yetiba, where a camp was made near a permanent stream of considerable volume.

The Yetiba, called also Emerald River, enters the sea on the western side of the island. It has its source in hills of the central part of the island flowing from springs. Along its course there are mangrove swamps, rain forest, ironstone ridges covered with Stringybark-gums, and also rather barren quartzite hills. A mission station has been now established on this stream, and the island proclaimed a natives' reserve.

Batalumbu is a circular bay with narrow entrance on the north-west corner of the island. North-West Bay is several miles eastward of it, and a large landlocked sheet of water with a wooded islet in the centre of the bay. Port Langdon is on the north-east of the island, a large deep bay with a sandbar across its inner half. Water birds were numerous here, but the country is, despite several permanent creeks, dry and sandy. Amakurupa is one, a stream which consists of several branches flowing into a large brackish lagoon or lake connected with the sea by a shallow and winding river. The shores of the lagoon are the home of many water and shore birds. The greater portion of the stay of two days at this place was spent in refloating the ketch, which went aground on the bar.

Talakurupa is a native camping-place near the head of East Bay, while Amakulu is a creek on the south side of the island which has a deep estuary, but a shallow entrance. The country around is very swampy, and has numerous lily lagoons and ponds frequented by Jabiru and Native Companion. Birds were also observed on Arichangoa (Winchilsea Island), Angoraripa (Woodah Island), and Makalaoba (Bickerton Island).

Many of the birds are known by name to the natives (the Ingura Tribe), and where these have been ascertained they are mentioned. In the pronunciation of these words all the vowels are long and no syllable is definitely accented except in the cases marked. The general native word for bird, applied only when the bird is unrecognized is "yurumba"; for egg, it is "cinumamo."

Dromaius novae-hollandiae (Emu).—A single feather was picked up in the bush at North-West Bay, but questions put to the natives make it almost certain that the feather was from the mainland, and had been dropped from some native ornament. No signs of the bird itself were ever seen; the natives knew it well, but said it was only found on the mainland, and none of the rock-drawings in caves on the island depict the bird or its tracks. The birds or their tracks are often seen at Roper River and other places along the coast. The Nungubuyu, on the

mainland opposite, who are well acquainted with it, call it "wain." The feathers are in demand for the making of dancing plumes, etc.

Megapodius reinwardt (Scrub Fowl).—This bird was common in the scrubs all over the island. Mounds were examined at Amalipa, Amakurupa, Amakulu, and Yetiba, as well as on Woodah and Winchilsea Islands to the North.

On 22nd August the birds were seen at work on a mound in dense scrub at Yetiba. On the 27th they were again seen at work, and some time was spent digging out the mound. It was only about four feet in height and six feet in diameter at the top. The first layer, on the summit of the mound, was composed of leaves and sticks. Beneath this was a layer about two feet thick of compacted debris and sand, in which several places were noticed to be comparatively loose. On digging down at one of these places, the trend of the hole was seen to be out towards the foot of the mound, passing through compact root-matted sandy soil. At a depth of four feet two eggs were found, each buried among the loose debris in a separate pocket in the harder earth. The hole was seen to be somewhat in the form of an open spiral, its diameter becoming less towards the bottom, where it measures nine inches in diameter.

While the author was crouching head-first in the hole, throwing out leaves and sticks, two birds, male and female, came up and commenced adding to the mound, scratching up and propelling the leaves vigorously up the mound within a distance of ten to twelve feet of the human intruder, without any signs of fear. After sitting in full view, watching them for some time, an attempt was made to reach the camera hanging on a tree at the foot of the mound. They then became alarmed and moved off for some distance through the scrub, where they could be heard scratching for food. Only two eggs, both freshly laid, were obtained on this occasion. Next day it was noticed that the holes made had been partly filled in again.

The natives on one occasion led the way to a large mound in dense scrub, beside a creek running into the Yetiba. It appeared to be of considerable age, being covered in shrubs and low trees. It was on ground sloping to the creek; on the lower side its height was 25 feet, on the higher side 15 feet, while at the base level of the higher side its circumference was 64 yards; at the summit it measured over 12 feet across. The mound consisted of sandy soil, comparatively loose near the summit, with numerous tracks of natives and of wallaby around it; in the top were several depressions filled with sticks and leaves. No eggs could be found in it, but the native tracks led one to believe it had been recently rifled.

Both the above-mentioned mounds and others were kept under observation until April, 1922, and the natives obtained eggs from them at intervals during the whole period. They call the eggs "inikappuru." They often prepare them by breaking a hole in one side of an egg and placing it, hole uppermost, on the fire, until the contents are partly cooked. They refrain from killing the birds, the younger men saying that the old men would be angry should they do so; no restrictions seem to be placed on the taking of the eggs. In digging in the mounds newly-hatched birds are met with, and these are usually killed and eaten.

The birds were seen to retire to roost about an hour before dark, generally in the upper branches of large Nutmeg or Fig trees. The cat-like calls of the males, each answering the other, were often heard at dusk, and occasionally during the night.

Turnix castanota (Chestnut-backed Quail).—Native name, "tomameripa." Four eggs were taken in a clutch in grass under a shrub at Yetiba, in December. The parent bird flew off, but was not taken. Soon afterwards several dozen were flushed in the grass near the same place. The natives brought in many clutches of eggs and a young one during December and January. The birds were also taken during August in the same locality.

Eulabeornis castaneiventris (Chestnut-bellied Rail).—Native name, "aramunyi." This bird was noticed on several occasions at Yetiba.

Ptilonopus ewingi (Rose-crowned Pigeon).—This bird was heard on several occasions in the dense rain forest in the valley of the Yetiba Creek, where its loud call was difficult to locate. The flight is rapid and noisy, and the birds proved extremely wary. Only one was taken, in August, after repeated attempts to approach them. They were always seen singly or in pairs.

Myristicivora bicolor (Nutmeg Pigeon).—These birds appeared at the beginning of the "wet" season, November, and were found in large flocks, feeding in the wild Nutmeg-trees (*Myristica insipida*) on the ripening fruit. In the stomachs and throats were found numbers of whole nutmegs. By the beginning of February the birds seemed to have stripped the fruit from the trees in the extensive Nutmeg groves, and all the birds had disappeared by the middle of March, probably having migrated to New Guinea or the Moluccas. At the beginning of March several large flocks, each comprising probably several hundred birds, were seen flying high overhead.

Columba humeralis (Bar-shouldered Dove).—Native name, "t i k u l u" The native name is derived from the charac-

teristic song notes of the bird. They do not distinguish between it and *G. placida*, which is also found on the island, both being called by the same name. A nest with one egg was secured on 6th February. It was merely a few twigs placed on a forked branch, upon which the eggs rested precariously. The birds were common everywhere over the island, and at Yetiba hundreds were often to be seen in the early morning feeding together in patches of recently-burnt-over scrub and grassland.

Geopelia placida (Peaceful Dove).—This Dove was very rarely seen. The single male taken was confused with the preceding by the natives who saw it.

Chalcophaps chrysochlora (Green-winged Pigeon).—Only two specimens of this bird were noted. They were both seen among the dense forest bordering the upper reaches of Yetiba Creek, feeding on the fruit of *Morinda citrifolia*.

Phaps chalcoptera (Bronzewing).—North-West Bay.

Haematopus ostralegus (Pied Oyster-catcher).—North-West Bay.

Limosa lapponica (Bar-tailed Godwit).—Yetiba.

Actitis hypoleucos (Common Sandpiper).—Yetiba.

Burhinus magnirostris (Southern Stone-Plover).—The natives dislike hearing this bird calling at night when away from the camp-fire. It was often noticed among the Stringybark-trees on the wooded rises, but could seldom be stalked.

Antigone rubicunda (Australian Crane).—Native name, "nguruku." Very plentiful in swamps at Yetiba. They are commonly used as food by the natives. The birds constantly parade along the beaches at dawn and dusk in search of food, and their tracks are everywhere noticeable. In the caves at the lower end of East Bay (near Talakurupa) drawings of the tracks of the "Native Companion" are a noticeable feature, replacing the Emu tracks commonly painted in like situations on the mainland. At Yetiba the birds were often seen near sundown flying at a great height towards Numburuwa (Rose River) on the adjoining mainland, and returning next morning at dawn. Their massed piping calls are a striking feature, and startle one when heard for the first time.

Threskiornis molucca (Australian White Ibis).—Native name, "ulamba." Several of these birds were used as food by the natives at Yetiba. Four or five were disturbed in a mangrove swamp in February. The tide was out and the birds had been busy digging out crabs from the sandy mud of the

swamp. In March the birds were again disturbed in the same swamp. On this occasion a strong wind drifted my canoe away out to sea, necessitating a long swim to regain it.

Platalea flavipes (Yellow-billed Spoonbill).—Native name, "arakarupu." One flock of these birds was seen at Yetiba. On the adjacent mainland they were very plentiful.

Xenorhynchus asiaticus (Jabiru).—Native name, "dunmukulia." Only one specimen of this bird was seen, at Angoroko.

Notophoxa aruensis (Pied Heron).—Yetiba.

Demigretta sacra (Reef Heron).—Native name, "willembilbia." One (blue form) was taken at Amakurupa Lake on the eastern side of the island. It was very common at Yetiba, both forms being seen on various occasions. At the mouth of the Roper River, on the mainland, there is a large mangrove swamp where these birds breed. This nesting-ground has already been described by McLennan* The thousands of birds flying over the swamp appeared as a snow-white cloud, half a mile long. In the swamp the noise was deafening, while every tree was heavily burdened with nests. On one occasion when visiting this swamp the dinghy was tied up on the fringe of the mangroves, and on attempting to leave again some two hours later, the tide having fallen several feet, we were compelled to drag the dinghy for several hundred yards through soft mud, sinking almost thigh-deep at every step. The Maranatives, during the breeding season, obtain an easy means of sustenance from the eggs and nestlings of this bird. The majority of the birds are of the white form, only a sprinkling being slaty-grey, and these look strangely out of place among their white associates.

Dendrocygna eytoni (Plumed Whistling Duck).—Native names, "uramunyi, jangajanga." Large numbers of this duck feed in the waters of Amakurupa Lake. Several mobs were noticed at Yetiba flying towards Amakurupa, having come from the mainland. It is also extremely common on the lagoons at Numburuwa (Rose River) on the adjacent mainland.

Tadorna radjah (White-headed Shelduck).—Native name, "orakarupu." This duck was seen on several occasions at Yetiba, generally only in twos or threes. The natives say that they are so wary that it is almost impossible to spear them.

Anseranas semipalmata (Pied Goose).—Native name, "yingagia." Three of these birds had their home in a dense

*McLennan, "The Emu," XVI, 1917, pp. 150-4.

patch of mangrove swamp near the mouth of the Yetiba Creek, from whence they flew whenever the sound of oars was heard by them.

Pelecanus conspicillatus (Pelican).—Native names, "tumpula, tomakulu." Fairly common along the beach at Yetiba. At Port Langdon and Amakurupa they were exceedingly plentiful, especially on the waters of the lake at the latter place. Rowing over the lake at a late hour at night, returning from a trip to the centre of the island, several hundred of these birds were noticed on a sandbank in company with a very large flock of Terns. The birds are a favourite food of the natives, and therefore have become very wary and difficult to approach.

Astur fasciatus (Australian Goshawk).—Native name, "urarabura." Yetiba.

Accipiter cirrhocephalus (Collared Sparrowhawk).—Yetiba.

Pandion leucocephalus (Osprey).—Amakurupa. Three eggs were taken by natives and brought to Yetiba in April, being carried in a container made from a sheet of paper-bark rolled around them and tied at each end with the inner bark fibre of a native hibiscus.

Haliastur sphenurus (Whistling Eagle).—Native name, "tomaruru." Port Langdon.

Ninox boobook (Boobook Owl).—Yetiba.

Trichoglossus rubritorquis (Red-collared Lorikeet).—Native name, "magijia." Extremely common among the flowering Paperbarks (*Melaleuca*) and Gumtrees, in flocks of six to a dozen. When alarmed the birds congregate together in an excited company. The natives, taking advantage of this habit, first frighten them and then throw a spear at the closely crowded birds, seldom failing to bring one down. The feathers are in great demand for making armlets and head ornaments, while the birds are eaten and specially relished because their bodies are full of fat.

Calyptorhynchus banksi (Red-tailed Black Cockatoo).—Many hundreds of these birds were seen feeding on the seed-cones of the Pinetree-like Sheoak (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) growing along the beaches at Angoroko and Yetiba. They constantly emit discordant screams, and on being disturbed fly off with a slow, heavy flight. This lack of speed is perhaps more apparent than real, owing to the slow motions of the wings. The natives are able to stalk these birds up the wind, and from a short range readily spear them. The brilliant red-and-black tail-feathers of the males are used as hair ornaments among

them, being often fastened into a headband made of flying 'possum fur.

Kakatoo galerita (White Cockatoo).—Native name, "towateru." Seen often at Yetiba, and common all over Grootte Eylandt. Its sudden scream is very disconcerting when one is stalking other game.

Licmetis sanguinea (Bare-eyed Cockatoo).—Amakulu, Yetiba.

Aprosmictus erythropterus (Red-wing Parrot).—Native name, "maerumija." Yetiba. This bird was seen on various occasions, always in pairs, never in flocks like the Lorikeet. One pair was seen early in the morning feeding on the ground in a recently-burnt-over patch of grass.

Podargus strigoides (Tawny Frogmouth).—Native name, "yokoroko." North-West Bay, Yetiba. A pair was discovered asleep in a large rough-barked mangrove; one bird was secured with a butterfly-net without its attempting to escape. Its mate, which had been asleep somewhere near, flew to an adjoining tree and settled down again.

Eurystomus orientalis (Dollar Bird).—This bird was noticed singly on several occasions at Yetiba. The stomach of one bird contained many winged females of the Green Tree-ant (*Oecophylla smaragdina*) and one large buprestid Beetle (*Stigmodera macfarlanei*). This bird was extremely common at Batavia River, North Queensland, in May, 1921, as many as a dozen being in sight at once.

Alcyone azurea (Blue Kingfisher).—Native name, "oranjen-jenura." Yetiba.

Alcyone pusilla (Little Kingfisher).—Yetiba.

Dacelo leachi (Blue-winged Kookoburra).—Yetiba. The laugh of this bird is comparatively feeble; it commences in a similiar manner to that of *D. gigas*, but soon changes to a loud cry, ending *diminuendo*. *D. leachi* was seen at the Roper River, where *D. gigas* is said also to have been heard on several occasions. Mr. H. E. Warren informed me that at the MacArthur River, some hundred miles further south, *gigas* is the one usually seen and heard.

Halcyon macleayi (Forest Kingfisher).—Native name, "tomonkoro." Common in parties of three or four in the Stringybark forests near Yetiba. One bird was noticed with a small snake in its beak, but on being disturbed, dropped it. The snake could not, however, be found in the thick grass.

Merops ornatus (Bee-eater).—Native name, "inuabutau." Common on the Sheoaks (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) along the beaches at Yetiba and Angoroko, where they were frequently noticed hawking for flying insects, returning after each capture to the same branch. The evolutions in the air as they pursued some elusive insect were fascinating to watch.

Centropus phasianinus (Pheasant Coucal).—Amakurupa, Yetiba. This bird was flushed on several occasions, generally in long grass, from whence the birds fly on being disturbed, taking shelter in thickly foliaged trees.

Pitta iris (Rainbow Pitta).—Only one specimen of this bird was seen, in a mangrove swamp at Yetiba during August.

Rhipidura setosa (Northern Fantail).—Yetiba.

Myiagra rubecula (Leaden Flycatcher).—Yetiba. Fairly common and always exceedingly tame, hawking flies right into the camp and at times approaching within a couple of feet of one to snap up the march-flies killed while sucking blood from one's exposed limbs. Grasshoppers, moths, and butterflies were all seen being taken by this voracious little bird. In the scrub at times they follow one so closely, feeding on the insects disturbed in one's passage, that one could reach out and touch them. Usually they were seen only singly, or at most in pairs.

Piezorhynchus alecto (Shining Flycatcher).—Yetiba. A nest with one egg was found on a branch overhanging the waterfall at Yetiba. The birds were often noticed flying up and down the stream catching insects.

Microeca flavigaster (Lemon-breasted Flycatcher).—Yetiba.

Pachycephala rufiventris (Rufus-breasted Whistler).—Yetiba.

Pachycephala simplex (Brown Whistler).—Yetiba, North-West Bay. This bird is a sweet, loud singer.

Colluricincla harmonica (Grey Shrike-Thrush).—Yetiba. Only seen once, when two males were heard singing in a swampy thicket and recognized instantly by their sweet powerful notes.

Colluricincla brunnea (Brown Shrike-Thrush).—Yetiba.

Grallina cyanoleuca (Magpie-Lark).—Seen at Yetiba in the open country along the banks of the northern branch of the creek.

Graucalus hypoleucus (White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike).—Yetiba.

Lalage leucomela (Pied Caterpillar-eater).—Yetiba.

Sphecothebes flaviventris (Yellow Fig-Bird).—Yetiba. Taken once in the branches of a large Figtree (*Ficus retusa*) in the coastal scrub.

Pomatostomus rubeculus (Red-breasted Babbler).—Yetiba.

Gerygone chloronota (Green-backed Warbler).—Yetiba. A female was found at a nest with two young. The nest was pendulous in style and fastened to creepers growing over a scrub tree.

Malurus melanocephalus (Orange-backed Wren).—A male was found on a pandanus in the hills at the source of the Yetiba, while another, a female, was taken at Yetiba. The brilliant orange back appears flame-coloured as the bird darts in and out of the pandanus foliage. No other bird is so conspicuous for its size as is this living ball of fire.

Artamus leucorhynchus (White-breasted Wood-Swallow).—A pair of these birds was found in an old Tamarind-tree (*Tamarindus indicus*) on an islet in the centre of North-West Bay. This island, which is in an almost completely landlocked bay, was in past times a camping-place of the Macassar traders who visited the coasts of Australia, and the Tamarind-trees were planted by them. They were well protected from the elements and better able to protect themselves from the attacks of the fierce Ingura natives than on the mainland.

Dicaeum hirundinaceum (Mistletoe Bird).—Yetiba. The almost inaudible call of this tiny bird was heard on many occasions. The birds frequented the mistletoe growing on a yellow-flowered tree (*Pomadereus excelsa*) growing along the margins of the swamps, and the ejected mistletoe seeds were noticed to be plentifully attached to the branches.

Pardalotus melanacephalus (Black-headed Pardalote).—Yetiba. Common on the banks of the river, where its nesting holes were noticed in the sandy banks.

Melithreptus albogularis (White-throated Honey-eater).—Yetiba.

Myzomela erythrocephala (Red-headed Honey-eater).—Yetiba.

Stigmatops indistincta (Brown Honey-eater).—Islet in North-West Bay, Yetiba. This bird appeared to be the most common one to be met with on the island, being noticed practically every day in numbers.

Stomiopera unicolor (White-gaped Honey-eater).—Amakulu, Yetiba.

Philemon argenticeps (Silvery-crowned Friar Bird).—North-West Bay, Yetiba. One clutch of two fresh eggs was taken at Yetiba on 30th January, and another clutch of two in the hills at the source of the Yetiba about a week later. The nest is cup-shaped, and very compactly placed about four feet from the ground in an exposed position on a shrub.

Steganopleura annulosa (Black-tailed Finch).—North-West Bay, Yetiba. A pair were taken on 24th August with a butterfly-net, nesting in the drooping dead leaves of a pandanus at Yetiba. The nest contained three eggs well advanced in incubation.

Oriolus flavocinctus (Yellow Oriole).—Native name, "dejoru." This bird was easily identified by its clear notes interpreted in the name "Oriole." It was commonly noticed in the upper branches of trees overhanging the creeks, repeating its single call again and again.

Chibia bracteata (Spangled Drongo).—North-West Bay. To discover this bird, as well as Crows and Hawks, it is only necessary to fire an area of grassland. Many of these birds quickly arrive on the scene and perch in the trees near the fire, darting frequently down on to the burnt-over ground to obtain grasshoppers and other insects which have been overwhelmed and partly cooked by the fire. This bird was commonly present at Mapoon, Batavia River, in Queensland, in May, 1921.

Chlamydera nuchalis (Great Bower Bird).—North-West Bay, Yetiba. The playgrounds of this bird were noticed at Arichangoa (Winchilsea Island), Angoraripa (Woodah Island), Makalaoba (Bickerton Island), as well as at Amalipa, Talakurupa, and Yetiba. In every instance the only ornaments noticed were bleached land shells (*Xanthomelon*) and occasionally small bleached bones. At Yetiba the birds were noticed at play during January, February, and March, in a patch of scrub near the camp. A sentinel bird always gave warning of intrusions, but the birds became very accustomed to one's presence, allowing an approach to within some six or seven yards without retreating, but owing to the dense undergrowth it was not possible to photograph them.

Corvus cecillae (Australian Crow).—Native names, "mingua, euyunga." Yetiba. Seen in company with Hawks and Drongos following up bush-fires. Also frequently noticed as scavengers around the native camps. As soon as the natives:

leave a camp the birds can be seen flying down from their look-outs in the surrounding trees.

Gymnorhina tibicen (Black-backed Magpie).—Yetiba, male and female of the subspecies *eylandtensis* White. Several attempts were made to approach this bird without success, up to the middle of January. Several times they were heard warbling in the distance at dusk, but they seldom remained in one tree for long. A diary note for 12th January reads:—"Chased a Magpie through rain forest for quite a long way without coming up to it." Another for 13th January is—"After breakfast heard a Magpie calling and went after it, as far as Yetiba Waterfall, hearing the call at intervals, but not catching up to it in the dense timber, gave up, but coming back heard another piping near by, and seeing a Balamumu boy in the camp I got him to come with me. Every time we came in sight of the bird it flew away. Wading through a *Melaleuca* swamp, we climbed up a wooded stony rise. Here the bird joined a flock of four others which had been feeding on the ground. We covered ourselves with branches, but this proved unavailing. Once four of them alighted on the ground to feed, the other one remaining as sentinel in the Stringybark-trees. Each time we approached they flew off. We had gone several miles in a big circle on the stony ridge when the birds separated. An immature female, perching in a tree, allowed me to approach just within range; secured it as it flew off again. The weather was hot; got back to camp exhausted."
