

**Pelicans Feeding on Feather.** The Australian Pelican, *Pelecanus conspicillatus*, is, by the general ornithologist, thought to feed on fish and probably a rather "vague" variety of crustaceans. We, also, had the same thought until an extraordinary item of diet came to our notice while we were watching Pelicans killing, and attempting to swallow, large juvenile Silver Gulls, *Larus novaehollandiae*.

On Lake Tutchewop, midway between Kerang and Swan Hill, in northern Victoria, Silver Gulls have bred for several seasons on a small mud island, which is in shallow water and close to the shore. During the third week in January 1975, we waded onto this island and found seven nests of Silver Gulls still occupied with eggs, and a few downy young, with some maturing feathered juveniles, crouching hidden under draping samphire branches.

On the shore a few scattered juveniles were about and some swimming out at distances up to 100 m from the shore. Following a study of these birds our attention was drawn to a flock of Pelicans, some 400 in all, idling 100 m off-shore, and Tom Lowe exclaimed "They are killing a young gull!" It was correct, a large almost full-feathered Gull was seen to be surrounded by 16 Pelicans, which were striving to get at the youngster.

One after another the monster bills were stabbing and stabbing at the poor unfortunate bird, then, as it became helpless, Pelican after Pelican would gain possession, toss it into the air, catch it and attempt to swallow it. Every attempt appeared to fail, because the wings of the Gull flopped limply open and hooked awkwardly over the Pelican's gape on either side. Although we watched for 20 minutes the dead Gull was still being bandied about as the birds tried to gain possession.

As we were leaving we noted a second group of Pelicans, 50 m away, acting in exactly the same way with a second Gull. This one, also, was too large and awkward for swallowing, despite prolonged efforts.

On visiting the area again, a week later, we saw yet another like incident; a large feathered young gull being killed by voracious Pelicans.

The adult Gulls kill, almost indiscriminately, newly hatched chicks if unattended; young of any age among the colony of nests, and often chicks as they swim about. The heads of the young Gulls are pecked repeatedly until their skulls are a bleeding and battered mass. These attacks and the gory results must be seen and noted by the nearby Pelicans and, it would appear, must be an incentive for them to follow suit.

The three dramas we watched were probably attacks on three unfortunate youngsters induced, by our intrusion into the rookery, to swim out further than usual, and into the danger zone of the Pelican horde.

We have no evidence indicating that this was a general practice, but one must discount the likelihood of these three attacks being the only ones perpetrated.

In previous seasons; as also in this present one, we had discussed the scarcity of reared young at the colony. We were inclined to blame solely the breeding Gulls, but if their behaviour is simply nature's way of preserving a balance, they now have an ally in this district.

As we approached on our second visit it was significant that the Pelicans on the water turned in our direction and cruised slowly towards us, as if they had learned quickly and expected more prey to result from our presence; certainly this movement towards us was contrary to their usual aloof and wary attitude, and was not mere curiosity. The thought emerges that if this behaviour were common a horde of Pelicans could raid the nest colony and destroy it.

We have had similar thoughts anent plovers and curlews. Why do not foxes take all of their eggs and young? There are many foxes, but our ground nesting species are successful in spite of their predation.

*V. T. and T. G. Lowe, Mystic Park, Victoria, 23/2/1975.*

**Square-tailed Kite in the Big Desert.** At approximately 11 a.m. on March 30, 1975, on the southern fringes of the Big Desert, 15km north of Yanac, Victoria, on the Murrayville Road, in company with three other members of the Bird Observers Club, Mrs. Elizabeth Abel and Messrs. Donald Bowery and Martin Schultz, I observed a raptor about the size of a Whistling Kite. The habitat in the vicinity was undulating grazing land with extensive areas of Mallee scrub on the fence lines and the rises.

The bird was flying over us at an altitude between 25 and 35m. This enabled excellent views of the bird. The weather was pleasantly warm and generally overcast, but the clouds tended to distribute the light so as to eliminate any dark, contrasting shadow. The following is a description of the bird with short notes on its actions.

It was about the same size as the Whistling Kite, *Haliastur sphenurus*. At first glance the under-surfaces of the wings appeared mid-brown with a most conspicuous 'window' near the end of each. Closer examination revealed faint barring on the pale secondaries and comparatively heavier barring on the primaries. The white patch on each wing was situated at the bases of these. The underwing coverts were mid-brown with a noticeably darker area running through this. The ventral surface of the body was orange-brown, while the chin and throat were whitish. The upper-parts were occasionally seen momentarily and appeared to be generally mid-brown. The under-tail was a transparent, creamy colour with a dark brown, wide band at the end of each feather.

While being watched, it was seen to fly head to wind, which was blowing from the west at approximately ten knots, and make slow progress forward, then it would sweep back for a repeat performance. It continually twisted and fanned its very square-cut tail while flying to windward. The wings were slightly upswept, but not so much as those of the Harriers, *Circus* spp., with which we have had experience.