

We left the nesting area and returned to the Land Rover which was parked about one hundred yards away. At 10.25 a.m., with the sun shining from a cloudless sky, an adult Spotted Nightjar was heard to give the typical "caw-caw-caw-gobble-gobble-gobble" call. This is the only record to our knowledge of this species calling during the day. We have heard them call on several occasions at night.

The photographic transparencies clearly reveal that the legs and feet of a mature Owlet-Nightjar are a bright pink in colour and that there are three forward toes and one hind toe on each foot. We have earlier mentioned that the colour of the feet of the fledglings is also pink.

It is the writers' opinion that the long whiskers surrounding the beaks of Owlet-Nightjars are feelers which enable the birds to feel their way inside dark hollows at night where it is impossible for them to see. These long whiskers are clearly visible in the colour transparencies. In comparison, the whiskers which surround the beaks of Spotted Nightjars, which do not enter hollows but also hawk for insects, are noticeably shorter than those on the Owlet-Nightjars.

We would be pleased to hear from other observers on this subject.

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## Nesting of the Marsh Tern

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The Marsh Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*) is a bird of the inland waters and it is frequently seen over the swamps around Melbourne. The flight is graceful, like that of all the terns, and this species will usually be observed in flocks. During days when strong winds are blowing, the sight of a flock of Marsh Terns hovering above a swamp, then suddenly diving on some insect with lightning-speed and agility, is indeed enthralling.

Although often seen near Melbourne the bird has rarely been observed nesting in the area. The only records in the *Emu* are those made by Bryant in 1950, at Point Cook, and by Smith and O'Connor in 1955, at Coode Island. The birds usually breed in thousands along the backwaters of the Murray River and in the Riverina district of New South Wales.

In November, 1960, the Terns were again nesting near Melbourne; this time at Frankston, an outer southern suburb, about 25 miles from the city on the eastern side of Port Phillip.

The swamp, on which the birds were nesting, covered an area of about 25 acres when the Terns were first located. The northern end had high rushes growing around the edges of the water, which was about 3 feet in depth, and this area appeared to be permanently under water. The southern end was more shallow, the water being approximately 12 inches in depth and the only vegetation was isolated clumps of ribbon-grass. It was in these clumps that the Terns nested.

Part of the swamp had been a ploughed paddock and it appeared that the area was only under water at times of heavy rainfall. The previous winter had been the sixth wettest period on record for this district.

Our first visit to the area was on November 26, at which time about 20 nests were found, the majority containing one or two eggs and four nests containing three eggs.

The nests were of the floating variety, unlike those recorded at Coode Island in 1955. They were composed almost entirely of ribbon-grass and were unlined, except for one nest which had a flight feather of the Silver Gull incorporated into the ribbon-grass. The nests were about 5 to 6 inches in diameter and the nesting-cavity about half-an-inch in depth.

Two clumps of ribbon-grass contained seven nests, the clumps being about 10 feet by 10 feet in dimensions. Most of the other clumps were smaller and usually contained only one or two nests.

Our second visit was made on December 3, when we found that the total number of nests had increased to 36. All contained eggs — 20 had clutches of three eggs, 14 contained two eggs each and two nests each held a single egg. The colour of the eggs varied markedly. The general colour varied from light green to light brown. The markings were black and grey and varied in size from spottings to blotches which were normally denser towards the larger end, but occasionally the markings were more uniform.

The size of the smallest egg was 35.3 mm. x 26.3 mm. and the largest egg 42.2 mm. x 28.5 mm. However, there was little variation in egg size within a single clutch.

When we visited the swamp on December 10, we found that in one of the clumps of ribbon-grass, that previously contained seven nests, all the eggs had been destroyed and the birds had deserted. Only a few egg shells remained and these had the appearance of being broken by other birds, probably the Swamp Harrier or the Silver Gull, both of which had been seen on previous occasions molesting the Terns. The other possible attacker would have been the copperhead snake which abounded on the edges of the swamp.

The next day, December 11, Mr. Len Robinson and Mr. Edgar Whitbourn visited the swamp and discovered 15 more nests at the northern end of the colony. We had not seen these nests on our first two visits and it seems probable that the birds which had their nests destroyed had nested again at the far end of the colony.

The following week was very hot and on December 17, we found that the southern half of the swamp had dried up. The birds had deserted the whole colony and the site where their nests had previously been floating on a foot of water was now dry land.

The northern end of the swamp still contained much water and careful searching located three occupied nests. However, there were no more than a dozen birds in the area, but one of these was a young bird — the only evidence of a successful hatching from the total of 54 nests found in the area. It was probable that the

eggs had been stolen by boys as the western side of the swamp was closely abutted by many newly built houses. We had been told by the owners of the land that boys often came to the swamp in search of eggs, and the drying up of the area had simplified their task. This may have been the explanation as not a sign of any eggshells was found as in the previous case, and this included the nests of other species as well.

Although the nesting of the Terns was to end in this manner, several interesting notes were made on their nesting behaviour.

As was mentioned previously, several other species of birds nested on the swamp and some in close association with the Terns. Altogether, 23 nests of the Hoary-headed Grebes were found — the average clutch was of three eggs but five eggs were found in several nests. In one clump of ribbon-grass a Tern and a Grebe were nesting within 3 feet of each other and in many places the nests of the Grebe were placed within the Tern colony.

Seven nests of the White-headed Stilt were also found, but these were all built on small islands of solid ground, many of which were within the Tern colony. Most of these nests were built alongside an old fence which ran across the swamp and penetrated the Tern colony. The closest that a Stilt nested to a Tern was about 20 feet.

It is more correct to say, however, that it was the Tern which nested within the Grebe and Stilt colonies, for even at the time of our first visit many young Grebes and Stilts were found in the nests. By the time the swamp became dry the majority of the Grebes and Stilts had successfully reared their young.

A Swamphen was found nesting near the northern end of the Tern colony on December 3, but on December 17, the 5 eggs had disappeared.

At the far northern end of the swamp several old Swans' nests were found. They must have been nesting on the occasion of our first visit, as on December 3, six very young cygnets were seen in the company of a flock of Black Swans. Towards these birds the Terns showed no animosity, but to Silver Gulls, Swamp-Harriers and human intruders they were always hostile.

About 100 Silver Gulls were always to be seen at the extreme southern end of the swamp, and at regular intervals several Gulls would fly over the Tern colony and swoop low over their nests, in an attempt to steal the eggs. However, on each occasion a number of Terns would fly towards the intruders and drive them away. Never at any time did we see a Gull succeed in taking the eggs.

When we approached the colony, by wading through the swamp, the Terns would immediately flock together and dive at us, passing only inches above our heads, the whole time keeping up an incessant shrieking. However, when a "hide" was erected near one of the nests the birds reacted very differently. Not only did they return but they did so within seconds of our entering the "hide",

and it was not necessary to arrange for someone to walk away from the area.

It was interesting to note that birds in immature plumage were also breeding, as both the male and female birds at one nest that we photographed had brown bills and legs.

Unlike the colony observed by Bourke in the Riverina, both sexes were observed to share the brooding of the eggs, and often the two birds would be at the nest together. While one bird was sitting on the nest its mate would sometimes search for food in the swamp within a few yards of the nest, but the main feeding ground was in the north-west corner over the rushes, where insect life abounded. On one occasion, after we had disturbed the birds while using the "hide", four birds hovered over the one nest, and it was not until the first pair was settled on the nest again that the second pair flew back to their own nest.

In conclusion, it appears that the Marsh Terns nest in the vicinity of Melbourne, or at least southern Victoria, much more frequently than is generally supposed, for gradually more and more records are being made with the increase in bird observing around Melbourne.

In November, 1958, a flock of Marsh Terns came to one of the Carrum swamps but after a few weeks they departed without nesting. Possibly they nested in some other swamp, unknown to us.

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**Notes on the Pied Butcher-bird.** The Pied Butcher-bird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*), a study in black and white, is found throughout the northern parts of Australia, although it is much scarcer in the Kimberleys than in the east. From my personal observations it would appear to be numerically stronger in southern Queensland than elsewhere in Australia. In this area it sometimes appears to be as plentiful as the Grey Butcher-bird (*C. torquatus*). The range extends southward to northern Victoria and northern South Australia, while in the west it extends to the area of the Trans-continental Railway, although there are a few records of its occurrence further south. It does not occur in the extreme south of each State, but as it appears to be a greater wanderer than the Grey Butcher-bird it probably will extend its range throughout the Continent.

The beautiful, bubbling, flute-like song of the Pied Butcher-bird is heard at its best in the late evening and early in the morning, and also on moonlit nights. At certain times these birds become very noisy and utter a great variety of calls.

The food consists of insects, mice and small birds. On one occasion while I was watching a flock of Banded Finches (*Steganopleura bichenovii*) drinking from a pool of water near Quilpie, south-west Queensland, a Pied Butcher-bird seized one of the Finches while the bird had its beak in the water. In common