

"Letter from Knowsley Hall, Lancashire." *The North Western Naturalist* Dec^o 1934.

A. H. Chesholm "The Emu 1940 Gilbert," discovered, singlebanded, more new & little known birds than any other man before or since his time, i.e. Australian birds.

accompanied by John Gould, his employer, Gilbert arrived in Australia for the first time in 1838, & after a successful collecting trip, returned to England in 1841. In 1842 he returned unaccompanied to Australia to collect again for Gould. In June 1845, as a member of Dr. Leichhardt's Overland Expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, Gilbert was done to death by aborigines near the Gulf of Carpentaria. "as a companion none was more cheerful or more agreeable; as a man none more indefatigable or more persevering." (John Roper letter re Gilbert's death) P.Z.S. London 1846. pp 79-80

Extracts from letter dated Sept 13 1842 from Gilbert to Gould.
relating to Drummond's

--- I have been on an Expedition a considerable distance from the settled districts of the Colony, --- to the Victoria Plains --- about 40 miles north of the Loddon District, this however was not our limit, for we reached a large River & Lakes nearly forty miles further north than the Moore's River --- as the party were all mounted & did not at all wish to carry more, each man than his own provisions, I was under necessity of getting a horse. To hire one for the time I found would have been ruinous.

I therefore thought as I was strongly advised so, that it would be much cheaper in the end to purchase one which I did, & when I have done with its services I can sell it again for nearly the sum I gave. --- & it was fortunate I did so, for I made so large a collection, my horse was completely loaded home. In the latter part of the Expedition I &

Mr Drummond were left alone, he to collect Botanical specimens & I to scrape together a sort of omnium gatherum. We were out nearly three weeks, travelling over every possible variety of Australian country, with here & there very beautiful grassy hills, & a tolerably clear country; in our homeward track we discovered a district of country more richly grassed than any other portion of Western

Australia yet known, at least 30 miles in extent - - - & since²
our return home, on making known what we had seen, the
Settlers generally expressed themselves very warmly on our discovery
being not a little pleased at the prospect of such a fine Country
being thrown open to them for depasturing their rapidly
increasing flocks & herds. When starting on this expedition I
fully calculated on hearing or seeing something of the Leipoa
(Mallee fowl), indeed this was my only attraction in
accompanying the Party, but I was disappointed in this
respect, I found afterwards we did not go far enough East.
Mr Drummond & myself returned to obtain a fresh supply
of provisions, & start again for the Wongan Hills around which
the Natives tell me these birds breed. It was necessary
also to return to relieve ourselves from our accumulated
collections. [I ~~just~~ heard at Toodyay of an immigrant ship newly come
in, a road to Perth for expected mail only to receive one very brief
note.] All I can say is I felt extremely vexed at riding as
hard as I did 60 miles & only to receive a short note.

[an account of several birds & animals that Gilbert collected
followed here.]

Perth Oct 9 1842 In a fortnight after the date of above^{ie 3, 9, 42}
being detained by rainy weather I with Mr Drummond & his
younger son [Johnston] left the Toodyay District, & for the
purpose of searching for the Leipoa (Mallee fowl) & Mr Drummond
to Botany. The first day we reached Watering, a distance of
10 miles. The next day travelling over Gwangra [Guangan?] ^{ie 3, 9, 42}
Plains, a good & bad country in rapid succession for twenty
miles we halted for the night at Barnaring. We were
still 10 or ~~11~~ 12 miles from Wongan Hills - - - The next day
we were early on our journey with the Wongan Hills in
sight before us. During nearly the whole of this day we had

to travel through an almost impenetrable scrub, through which we had no small difficulty to lead our horses. Although this days distance did not exceed 12 miles it was so late when we had accomplished it that we gave up all hope of moving towards the Hill until next morning, our principle care now was to look out for water & feed for our horses. In this we were foiled in a great many attempts. There was only one spot of freshwater to be found, but not a blade of grass could be seen near, & to add to our Chagim, our native guide, for the first time confessed his ignorance of the country generally adjacent to the Hill. He told us we must all search, which we eventually did, & after several hours wandering about till night was coming on, we were eventually obliged to bivouac for the night on the edge of a nearly dried up swamp. Where a little indifferent grass could be picked up for the horses round the edges of the water marks but the water was nearly as salt as the ocean. However we had no choice & being the whole day without a drink of anything we perhaps did not think it as bad as it really was. However to make the best of everything, we made our Tea very strong & sweet, which in some measure concealed the peculiar flavour of the water. It was so bad our horses would not drink it. The next morning we made our breakfast of this same water, & leaving the horses to feed as well as they could upon such poor fare, sallied forth in quest of the Lepoas nests. We had not progressed more than a quarter of a mile, when, seeing large flat rocks on our right, we all as if by momentary impulse, felt assured there was water & on ascending the upper part, found two tolerably large basins of delicious rainwater. Never were libations more deep & earnest in any liquid than in these Native basins.

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after each of us drank as much as we could we set off again & very soon arrived at a thicket of small *Melaleucas* etc. in which we were constantly starting several small species of Kangaroos - one which the natives call Dama (Tamar) another, the little nail tailed Kangaroo. I also saw the little Crescent marked species, but in each case the thing was so instantaneous & the distance between us so short, with the closeness of the plants constantly interfering with our every motion, that it was perfectly impossible to get a shot at them. While the herbage was too thick to allow the dogs a shadow of a chance of catching one: From this thicket we came upon a somewhat clearer space & after obtaining a little breathing entered the thicket I had been so long anxious to penetrate. The native now told me to keep a good look out, as we were among the Ngonoos (Gnows) ^{(Native of Malacca (owl))} Hellocks, & in half an hour after we came upon one. The brush was so thick that we were almost running over it before seeing it. So anxious was I to see the hidden treasures within [the nest mound] that in my haste I threw aside the Black fellow & began scraping off the upper part of the Mound. This the Black fellow did not at all understand & was becoming very indignant, at the same time making me understand that, as I had never seen this nest before, I had better trust him to get out the eggs or I should in my haste & impatience certainly break them. I therefore let him have his way & he began scraping off the earth very carefully from the centre, throwing it over the side so that the mound soon bore the form of a large basin. About 2 feet of earth was in this way thrown off when the large ends of two eggs met my anxious gaze. Both these eggs were resting on their smaller apex & the earth around them

had to be carefully removed to prevent the possibility of breaking ^{the} shell which is so extremely fragile when first exposed to the atmosphere. This mound was small, about 3 ft in height and 7 to 9 feet in circumference. The form as left by the bird was in outline the segment of a circle. About a hundred yards from this first nest we came upon a second rather larger, --- this contained 3 eggs only. Although we saw 7 or 8 more mounds no more than these two contained eggs. Thus we were too early, a week later & we should have doubtless found many more. To give you an idea of the place these birds choose for its remarkable mode of rearing its young I will describe it as nearly as I can.

The Wongan Hills are about 1300 feet above the level of the sea, in a N. N. E. direction from Drummonds house in the Loobyay. The sides of these hills are thickly clothed with a dense forest of Eucalyptus. Around the foot of these hills on the level land is a dense thicket, for several miles, of upright growing & thickly bushy plants, so high in most parts we could not see over the tops, & so dense, if one of us separated only a few yards, were obliged to (cooee) to prevent our straying from each other. This thicket is again shadowed by a very curious species of dwarf Eucalyptus bearing yellow blossoms & growing from 15-30 ft in height, in many small & straight & slender stems. This is the species known to the natives as the Spearwood, & of which they make their spears, digging sticks, dowses etc. The whole formation is a fine reddish ironstone gravel, & this the Leipoa (Malleefowl or Grouse) scratches up from several yards around & thus forms its mound, to be afterwards converted into a hotbed for the reproduction of its offspring. I found the inner portions of the mounds had the finer particles of the gravel mixed with vegetable matter the fermentation of which produces the warmth

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sufficient for the purpose of hatching. Mr Drummond who had been several years accustomed to hotbeds in England, gave it as his opinion the heat around the eggs was about 80°. In both the nests with eggs, the white ant was very numerous, making its little covered galleries of earth around & attached to the shell thus showing a beautiful provision of nature in preparing the necessary tender food for the young bird, when emerging from the shell. One of the eggs in both cases I have preserved shows the white ant's tracks most beautifully. The largest mound I ever saw, & which appeared as if in a state of preparation for eggs, measured 45' in circumference, & if round in proportion on the top would have a full five feet in height. I remarked in all the nests not in a state of preparation for eggs that the inside or vegetable portion was always wet & cold. & I imagine from others I saw that the bird turns out the whole of the inside for the purpose of exposing the materials for drying before depositing its eggs & covering them up with soil. In both cases where I found eggs the upper part of the mound was perfectly & smoothly rounded over, so that anyone passing it without knowing the singular habit of the bird might very readily suppose it to be an ant-hill. Seeing mounds in this state is a sure sign of eggs being within, while the others without eggs, are not only not rounded over, but the centres so scooped out they form a hollow. -- The Seipoa -- lays its eggs directly in the centre of the mound, all at the same depth, separated only by about 3 inches of earth & so placed as to form a circle. I regret we were so early. Had we been a week later, the probability is I should have found the circle of eggs complete. However there is one thing to be thought of. If we had been only 3 or 4 days later the probability is, we should have found no water at all so that even in this respect it is evident Nature again assists these birds in endowing it with sufficient instinct to choose such a time as well as place in this inhospitable region to man but so well adapted to the

peculiar & extraordinary habit of this singular bird. The eggs I were all so perfectly fresh, --- not even the germ of the young bird could be detected. Is it not singular that all the eggs should be equally fresh as if the eggs did not go on in development from the time of laying, but the first eggs, as it were, waiting till the full number were deposited, so that the young shall appear all about the same time, for no one on looking at the immense size of the egg can for a moment suppose the bird capable of laying a number without a day at least intermission & perhaps even more. Four of the eggs were blown & yielded nearly a pint & a half. Three of the eggs weighed a pound & a half, thus giving for each egg a weight of 8 ounces. ---

The eggs are covered with an epidermis-like coating. --- (they are) $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches in length with a breadth of $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Varying the colour from a very light brown to a light salmon.

During the whole of the day we did not succeed in sighting or obtaining sight of the bird although we saw numerous tracks of its feet & many places where it had been scratching. We also saw its tracks on the sand, when crossing the dry beds of the swamps. at least 2 miles from their breeding thicket, which proves that the bird in procuring its food is not at all times confined to the bushes around its nest, only as it would appear, taking to those places for the purpose of incubating.

The native informed us the only chance of procuring the bird was by stationing ourselves in sight of the mound at a little distance, & remaining quiet & immovable till it made its appearance at Sundown. This I attempted & with the native encamped myself within 20 ~~feet~~ yards of the mound about an hour before sunset, taking the precaution to conceal ourselves well with bushes from the quick eye of

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the bird, but leaving just a sufficient opening to get a fair sight with my gun. In a half sitting, half crouching position, I clung remained in breathless anxiety for the approach of the bird I have so long wished to see, not daring to move a muscle for fear of moving a branch, or making a crushing noise of a dead leaf. till I was so cramped I could scarcely endure the pain in my limbs. The bird did not however make its appearance by dusk, & the native with the fear of wading thro the thicket in darkness (for there was no moon) became so impatient, & at length started up & began to talk so loud, & to make so much noise that I at once gave up all hopes of seeing the bird that night, & just as we were passing the mound we started the bird from the opposite side. But from the denseness of the thicket & the now perfect darkness closing around us, I had not a shadow of a chance of getting a shot at it.

We had now two miles of thicket to wade through & before one fourth of the distance was accomplished we were in such utter darkness as not to observe an object a yard distant: & our native in guiding us out lost his way. & in endeavouring to regain it took us nearly two miles more out of our way in reaching our bivouac in the swamp. It was really dreadful work, for, not being able to discern anything distinctly immediately before us we had to fairly push our way, occasionally getting ourselves completely tied up among the creeping plants. And by the time we did emerge from it we were nearly knocked up—our clothes torn, our legs, hands & faces cut & scratched most unmercifully. The poor black fellow was still worse off for having no other covering than a small Kangaroo cloak to protect his skin, his legs were bleeding from all points I could not therefore feel surprised at his impatience, although I consider I perhaps lost the chance of getting a shot at the bird.

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This too will I think account in some measure for our knowing so little of this bird's habit, because the native's description of the country generally has tended to keep back any of the settlers from running the risk of being without water so far away from their settled districts & I believe there are few who would go so far & penetrate such a thicket voluntarily.

Mr Roe the Surveyor General, who found these nests during his expedition to the interior in the year 1836, ready to hatch in the month of November, this gentleman informs me he invariably found either 7 or 8 eggs in a mound, while another authority has informed me of an instance of fourteen being taken from one mound.

After my ill attempt to procure the bird, as stated above I wished very much to remain & try the next night but Mr J. Drummond declined to accede to my wish, conceiving we should run a chance of being short or without provision before reaching home. I had no choice in the matter, as they came out for a certain number of days only, in a great measure to oblige me, but more particularly for the purpose of collecting botanical specimens. They having done all they wished in this way, felt no more inducement to remain. Finding I could not prevail on them I was of course obliged, very reluctantly to leave the Wangan Hills the next morning, which I very much regret as I would most willingly have remained a week in hopes of gaining more information of the bird & its curious habits. We therefore started off the next morning on our homeward track. - - - -

--- as the shearing season is now commenced & may be said to be in full operation, there is not the slightest chance of getting up another party to go to the Eastward. nor can I procure any natives for their season of meeting in great numbers to dig the edible root called by them Wargae (?) is now in full force.