

THE RAOU BIRD OBSERVATORY AT EYRE

by S. J. J. F. Davies

When the Australian Post Office closed the Eyre Telegraphic Station in 1927 it sold the building for £30, presumably thinking that it was worth no more than the value of the materials it contained. Sited less than a kilometre from the Southern Ocean, sheltered from the storms of the Great Australian Bight by two sand dunes, the building stood, uninhabited, for over forty years, defying both the elements and the vandals. The original purchaser took some materials from it and built them into his homestead on the Nullarbor, but the very rough terrain between the Eyre Highway and the old Telegraph Station protected it from the despoilation that has befallen the telegraph stations at Israelite Bay and Eucla. In 1965 the Government of Western Australia created the Nuytsland Nature Reserve, setting aside a long strip of the southern coast from Israelite Bay to the vicinity of Mundrabilla as a primitive area, with restricted access. The old Eyre Telegraph Station stood in this reserve, but still remained unused.

In 1976 two organisations, quite independently, became interested in Eyre. The Post Office Historical Society, realising the historic importance of the building and its remarkably good state of preservation, began to make plans for its restoration as a museum of the old Intercolonial Telegraph Line. The Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union at the same time realised its potential as a bird observatory and both bodies approached the W.A. Department of Fisheries and Wildlife to see whether restoration was feasible. Goodwill and co-operation have characterised the restoration project, so that by September of 1977, the RAOU was able to instal Syd Baker as the first caretaker of the Eyre Bird Observatory, followed by John Martindale as its first warden when the Observatory and Museum opened to visitors in April, 1978. A grant from the Utah Foundation helped the observatory to establish its scientific programme and the contribution of a great deal of material by the Department of Fisheries and



The former Telegraphic Station at Eyre which is now the RAOU Bird Observatory

Wildlife combined with a volunteer labour force of RAOU and Post Office Historical Society members, enabled the building to be restored. Scientific and domestic equipment was bought, a small telegraphic museum set up and Australia's first bird observatory brought into being.

What is a bird observatory? At the turn of the century a man living in the tiny village of Jutland in North-western Europe began to make careful records of the birds that struck the lighthouse near the village. He recorded the numbers of each species and the dates upon which he observed them. Gradually his records began to show the pattern of migration of various species of birds as they passed Jutland going north in the spring and south in the autumn. That was the first bird observatory. Thereafter many other observatories were established, both in Europe and North America, and they provided an increasingly clear picture of the patterns of bird migration, both from careful systematic sight records and from recoveries of birds banded at the observatories. But they did more than this. Because they provided accommodation for visitors, the observatories became a focus at which ornithologists, particularly young amateurs, could meet, could participate in careful regular scientific study of birds and could learn the techniques of scientific ornithology. Much of the success of amateur ornithology in Britain had its origin in the bird observatories.

By the mid-1970's the Field Investigation Committee of the RAOU had clearly in mind that observatories were needed in Australia. But where? Land was expensive, buildings more so and maintenance costs were

inflating at a tremendous rate. An observatory had to be at an attractive site, somewhere where birds came and went, and yet where interesting species lived throughout the year so that a year-round programme could develop. The building had to be large enough to accommodate visitors and the site protected from "development" yet accessible to visitors.

Eyre Telegraph Station met these requirements well. Being on the sea, Eyre receives an annual influx of waders from the Northern Hemisphere. A mallee belt extends eastward from south-western Australia along the Nullarbor coast, and the mallees there flower earlier than those in the south-west. As a result many species of nomadic honeyeaters visit the area in winter, so that the observatory receives both summer and winter migrants. Local populations of Red-capped Dotterels, Major Mitchell Cockatoo, Mallee Hens and Fairy Penguins provide material for year-round study of interesting species, and the general bird life of the area (over 160 species are now recorded) adds to the variety. Eyre is only 20 miles from the Eyre Highway, and the nearest settlement, Cocklebidy, is served by daily buses from Perth and Adelaide, so that access is fairly simple. At the same time, Eyre is sufficiently out of the way to have some of the romantic glamour that attaches to such famous overseas observatories as Skokholm and Fair Isle. Its environs lie in a fauna reserve and are, therefore, protected from unexpected development, and its historical associations give it an attraction beyond its biological ones.

Although I have written largely of the birds of Eyre, its reptiles and flora are equally interesting, containing an inter-mingling of south-eastern and south-western species, tempered with organisms from the inland that are characteristic of the Nullarbor plain itself. The Telegraph Station is a large building, with accommodation for 20 people at a time, and would be an ideal place for field excursions from schools. Full board is \$10 per day (\$65 per week) for those able to get to the Observatory under their own steam. For those needing to be picked up in a four-wheel drive vehicle at Cocklebidy the charge for the first night is \$16, to recompense the cost involved in the ferrying; subsequent nights are at the \$10 a night rate. Although these charges may sound high, the RAOU receives no subsidy for the running of the Observatory, and they are the lowest that can be sustained. They compare well with hotel charges on the Eyre Highway. Teachers and others interested in using the facilities at the Eyre Bird Observatory may obtain further information by writing to the Warden, Eyre Bird Observatory, Cocklebidy, via Norseman, 6443 Western Australia.