

THE ANIMAL-LIFE OF THE SUNBURY DISTRICT
SIXTY YEARS AGO.

BY ISAAC BATEY.

(Communicated by A. G. Campbell.)

(Read before the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria, 8th July, 1907.)

SUNBURY, from its proximity to Melbourne, little more than twenty miles in a direct line north-west, was one of the earliest districts to be settled when pastoralists began to spread out from the infant settlement of Port Phillip in the thirties. The surrounding country consists chiefly of basaltic plains, lying at an elevation of about 750 feet above sea level, but rising quickly beyond to 1,200-1,500 feet. Here and there are old worn-down volcanic hills, while several deep creek valleys, the principal of which is that of Jackson's Creek, help to diversify the scene.

In the early days the principal timber trees were Sheoaks (*Casuarinas*), but these, owing to the progress of settlement, have almost disappeared, though in the creek valleys some Red Gums, *Eucalyptus rostrata*, and a few other bushes, such as *Hymen-anthera* and *Bursaria*, too small for firewood, still remain. The country was early devoted to sheep, and, as a consequence, the first settlers left no stone unturned to rid themselves of those native animals which were detrimental to pastoral pursuits; hence the extermination of the Dingoes or Native Dogs was soon taken in hand, on account of the damage they wrought among the sheep. Other native animals were frightened away by the trampling of the flocks and herds, and on the outbreak of the Bendigo and Forest Creek diggings, in 1851-4, the principal route to which lay through the Sunbury district, the enormous traffic along the Mount Alexander road seemed to complete the disappearance of many native animals we had been accustomed to meet with in our rambles.

The centre of the area, comprising some 15,000 acres, with which I propose to deal in the following notes was in the olden days known as the Red Stone Hill station, situated between Jackson's and Emu Creeks, about 4 miles south-east of Sunbury railway station, the junction of the Sunbury, Lancefield, and Melbourne roads being about the centre of the old station. Glencoe station, occupied by the Messrs. Page, was opposite to us, on the south side of Jackson's Creek, while Brodie's Forest comprised the southern portion of the area between the Emu and Deep Creeks, bounded by Wildwood on the north. To the north of us was Jackson's Koorakoorakup station, now included in Sir R. Clarke's Rupertswood estate.

I will take the mammals in their natural sequence, and briefly refer to those with which we were more or less familiar.

THE ORANGE-BELLIED WATER-RAT, *Hydromys chrysogaster*,

Geoff.—After our arrival in 1846, it was many years before we noticed Water-Rats on Jackson's Creek, and, as we used to fish early and late whenever we had an opportunity, they must have been scarce. However, they afterwards became very plentiful, for a friend trapped no less than twelve dozen in a comparatively short time. It is easily captured with a fish-baited rabbit trap, set close to the water.

THE DINGO, *Canis dingo*, Blumenb.—The Messrs. Page, pioneers of 1836, stated Dingoes or Native Dogs were the greatest trouble they had to contend with on their arrival in the district, and they destroyed many of them with set guns. In 1846 there were still enough of them about to cause annoyance to flockmasters. My father recounted a day with the hounds in 1848 when two were killed in Brodie's Forest, between Emu and Deep Creeks, about four miles from our homestead. In 1849 my father claimed to have killed the last Dingo in our vicinity with a poisoned bait. One peculiarity of Native Dogs is the proneness to follow a horseman or vehicle. Such an instance occurred to me in 1847, near the present township of Bulla.

THE BRUSH-TAILED PHASCOLOGALE, *Phascogale penicillata*, Shaw.—This handsome little animal, so remarkable for its activity, was rare, even in 1846, on Red Stone Hill and Glencoe, and it cannot be less than fifty years since the last was noted in those localities. In 1882 one was seen near Lancefield, and another, some years after, on the Dividing Range, towards Newham. In each case the animals had ensconced themselves in buildings, between the rafters and the roof.

THE POUCHED-MICE.—We had two kinds—the Thick-tailed, *Sminthopsis crassicaudata*, Gld., and the Brown, *Phascogale swainsoni*, Waterh. The latter was very rare, only one having been captured by a shepherd. The Thick-tailed Pouched-Mouse was met with as far back as I can remember. They were often found on turning over a heap of loose stones. Both kinds had handsome, fox-like heads.

THE COMMON DASYURE OR NATIVE CAT, *Dasyurus viverrinus*, Shaw.—In 1846 this animal was very numerous, but later at various intervals they seemed to be infested with a burrowing maggot which brought them almost to the verge of extinction, and it was some time before they again regained their numerical strength, but I do not think the attacks of this parasite would alone have sufficed to complete their extinction. As boys we waged incessant war against Native Cats, and more especially when their skins became valuable. Later on, when rabbits became plentiful, and had to be trapped, many Native Cats were caught in the traps. Up to 1875 they were fairly numerous on what was our old station, but for the last twenty years I have not seen one about their old haunts. In 1883 a Tiger-Cat, *D.*

maculatus, Kerr, was taken in a rabbit trap. This creature had always been a rare animal our way, and we surmised it came from the scrubby country to the north of Sunbury. The black Native Cat is a freak or sport, as I have taken a family of young containing both black and grey specimens, the mother being grey. From my experience I fancy the proportion of black to grey Native Cats is about 15 per cent. The pouch of the Dasyure is quite open, and the young appear to be attached to the teats for a certain time; how long cannot be stated. Then, evidently when too heavy to be carried, the mother deposits them in a grass nest concealed under loose stones, or in a hollow log or such-like. That the Native Cat is a cannibal we proved in our boyhood days.

THE SHORT-TAILED BANDICOOT, *Perameles*, sp.—This animal was not plentiful in 1846, and later became rarer still; however, twenty years later, it again became numerous with us. In 1883 a nest of young was found, since which I have not noticed it.

THE KOALA OR NATIVE BEAR, *Phascolarctus cinereus*, Goldf.—With us the Native Bear was a rarity, but in the early sixties a specimen was taken, while others visited us at intervals. In 1869, when on a visit to Mt. William, near Lancefield, 25 miles further north, I found them very plentiful. Judging by our observations, Native Bears seem to have the habit of travelling by night across the plains, from one range to another, for we would sometimes find them in the morning on a post, or the roof of an abandoned building.

THE COMMON OPOSSUM, *Trichosurus vulpecula*, Kerr.—Owing probably to the visits of the aborigines, this animal was not plentiful in the early days, but when they ceased to visit the district, about 1851, Opossums became numerous. Later, when the demand for their skins set in, they became nearly extinct. Of late years they have again increased, but, unfortunately, they get caught in the rabbit traps. On parts of Red Rock station they are, I learn, rather plentiful.

THE RING-TAILED OPOSSUM, *Pseudochirus peregrinus*, Bodd.—This animal was never plentiful, but is still to be found along Jackson's Creek.

THE FLYING PHALANGER OR FLYING SQUIRREL, *Petaurus breviceps*, Waterh.—The only specimen I remember was brought in by the cat one day, and by old residents was called the "Sugar Squirrel."

THE GREAT BRUSH SQUIRREL, *Petaurus taguanoides*, Desm.—Never very plentiful; some 12 years ago I found one drowned in a large dam at Newham. They were more common in the Macedon region, further north, than with us. Mr. W. Thom told me of two albinos he had seen at Bullengarook.

THE WOMBAT, *Phascalomys mitchelli*, Owen.—This animal

still exists in the Macedon region, where I have frequently seen their burrows, but never met the animal itself. On examining and skinning a dead one I was surprised to find it possessed a rudimentary tail similar to that of a Koala.

KANGAROOS AND WALLABIES.—To list the animals of any district in Victoria without a reference to the members of the great genus *Macropus* would seem strange, but the fact remains that in 1846 and later Kangaroos and Wallabies were never seen in the area I am speaking of, the reason probably being that owing to the open nature of the country they were easily frightened or driven away by the first settlers in the district, in 1836. However, further to the north-west and north, in the timbered country about Bullengarook and Macedon, occasional specimens are still to be met with. I have been informed that the disappearance of Wallabies is largely due to their having become victims to that dreaded scourge of the sheep-farmer, fluke.

THE PLATYPUS, *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*, Shaw.—This singular mammal is still to be found on Jackson's Creek, principally on that part adjacent to Glencoe, Red Stone Hill, and the old Koorakoorakup station, portion of which is now occupied by the township of Sunbury. Though the Melbourne side has been settled for some seventy years, that section of the creek is not nearly so bare of these curious creatures as one would expect. In former times, though a Platypus saw you before taking his dive, if you waited quietly he would rise again not many feet from where the downward plunge was taken. Now they seem to have learned the habits of man, and once down they retire into their burrows. It seems to me this strategy accounts for their survival on Jackson's Creek, for had it not become alive to the sense of danger by this time it would have become extinct. With regard to it, and birds also, the law should step in. A gun license is required, though to render it thoroughly effective landholders should be penalized for allowing persons to shoot over their holdings without permission.

FISH.—The Blackfish, *Gadopsis marmoratus*, Rich., was at one time plentiful in our portion of the creek, and I once secured a specimen weighing 2 lbs.

In early years the creek was alive with Minnows (*Galaxias*, sp.), and I remember three of us as boys taking twenty dozen in one day with a cotton line and bent pin. Since the introduction of trout and perch the Minnow has decreased, still there are odd years when it is fairly plentiful.

The fish known to us as the "Pute" was a very handsome little fish, shaped like a carp, about two inches long, some with bright yellow on under parts, others brown throughout, the fins and tail red, mouth very small; scales, for size of fish, large. They used

to be found under partially submerged logs, but have now disappeared from the creek. Some years ago I took several in the Five-mile Creek, near the Hanging Rock, in the Woodend district.

The Freshwater Herring or Grayling, *Prototroctes marrena*, Gunther, was occasionally taken in the olden days. It is an exquisite little fish, semi-transparent, with a silvery belly. Mr. W. Bowie informed me that years ago he used to make fine hauls of them in the Yarra near Studley Park, and that they possessed the smell of cucumbers. Some twelve years ago, when fishing in the Deep Creek, under the Cobaw Ranges, not far from Lancefield, I took a few specimens of this fish, and found they possessed the odour mentioned. The individuals we caught seldom exceeded a length of four inches, but on one occasion I caught a solitary specimen which measured fully six inches. I have been told that they used to be taken lower down the creek, at Keilor, at one time.

I might mention here that Jackson's Creek, from 1846 to 1852, ceased to run every year from end of December or early in January until the autumn rains about April, but one season it remained a chain of waterholes until August. Since 1852 the cessation of flow has been very rare, though a few years back it stopped running for a few weeks. When the creek started again the inflow of fresh water into the stagnant pools caused some destruction of Blackfish. We used to find them moping in the shallows, more or less covered with a fluffy white fungus, which also occurred on any dead ones.

Another fish occasionally caught in Jackson's Creek was the Tupong or Black Flathead, *Pseudaphritis urvillii*, Cuv. and Val. Below our dwelling was a pool of good depth and some 100 paces long. Throughout a long stoppage of the creek four flocks of sheep were daily watered at this hole, consequently it at last became so low that the Messrs. Page bailed it out for the sake of the fish. Among those obtained was one of these Black Flatheads. During our many fishing excursions we had at odd times landed small specimens of this fish, especially when the evenings were cold and windy; such an event was always taken as a hint to roll up our lines, for we seldom secured any other fish afterwards.

Both silver and yellow-bellied eels were numerous; the heaviest I ever captured weighed 4½ lbs. The Lamprey has occasionally been taken, more often after the creek had ceased running for a time.

REPTILES.—Black Snakes, *Pseudechis porphyriacus*, were never plentiful, and seem now to have become extinct. Brown Snakes, *Diemenia textilis*, are still common, but are often mistaken for the Tiger Snake, *Notechis scutatus*. One season long ago we killed thirty-seven of these reptiles.

Of lizards we had several varieties. The rough-scaled Rock Lizard frequents stone walls; the Blue-tongued, *Tiliqua scincoides*, White, was once rare, but seems to have increased of late years; the so-called Bloodsucker, *Amphibolurus muricatus*, White, can still be met with. A waterside lizard was once very common along the creek, and fairly tame; if bread crumbs were thrown down it would come and feed on them. On Redstone Hill, near the creek, is a patch of dusty ground which does not absorb moisture freely. This area has a quantity of sandstone (? Silurian, Ed.) blocks about it. Under some of them are to be found an elegant little lizard, with a very pale red tail. This lizard seems to be nocturnal in its habits, for in all my long experience I have never seen it abroad in daylight.

Finally, let me say a word about the aboriginals who used to live about Glencoe and Red Stone Hill stations. Mr. Richard Brodie, a pioneer of 1836, informed me that their favourite camping ground was known as "Native Point," and was at the junction of the Emu and Deep Creeks, a few miles above the present village of Bulla. Their last visit to our locality was about 1851, when four lubras, with an infant, came to wait for the brother of one of them to escort them to another part of the country.

A CURIOUS MAGPIE'S NEST.—Another magpie's nest built of wire is reported from the Horsham district. It was found in a fallen tree, and was composed of all kinds of wire—copper, short pieces of barbed wire, and even strips of wire netting. The nest was of the usual shape, over a foot deep, and about 3 lbs. in weight.—*Argus*, 28/6/07.

"OUR BOYS AND GIRLS" is the title of a new publication intended for the boys and girls of our schools. It is issued monthly, at the remarkably low price of 1d. per copy, with the object, it is stated, of "creating a live interest in school work, and to bring the children into closer touch with each other. If children think, observe, and give expression to their thoughts, geography, natural history, composition, &c., should receive an impetus." A prominent feature in each number issued (that for July being the fifth) is a column headed "Monthly Records," in which is given dates of flowering of plants, appearance of insects, nesting of birds, &c., which in course of time should form a very valuable record. It is edited by Mr. James Lindsay, of Heywood, who will be pleased to forward it post free for twelve months on receipt of eighteenpence. This is certainly not an extravagant expenditure, and we trust many of our junior members will become subscribers, for we feel sure they cannot fail to derive some benefit from its monthly budget of interesting items, and possibly may become contributors themselves.