



THE MOUND-MAKING MEGAPODE.

MOUND-MAKING BIRDS.



THE mound-making megapode, or jungle-fowl, belongs to the family *Megapodiidae*, in which the hatching of the eggs is generally left to the heat of the sun, assisted by the warmth evolved from a mass of vegetable matter collected by the parents, in which the eggs are embedded. The following is an account of the Australian species, by Mr. Gilbert, an observant naturalist and traveller in that country.

On Mr. Gilbert's arrival at Port Essington, his attention was attracted to numerous great mounds of earth, which were pointed out to him by some of the residents as being the tumuli of the aborigines. The natives, on the other hand, assured him that they were formed by the jungle-fowl for the purpose of hatching its eggs. But this last statement appeared so extraordinary, and so much at variance with the general habits of birds, that no one in the settlement believed them; and the

great size of the eggs brought in by them as the produce of this bird, strengthened the doubt of the veracity of their information. Mr. Gilbert, however, knowing the habits of *Leipoa*, took with him an intelligent native, and proceeded about the middle of November to Knocker's Bay, a portion of Port Essington harbour comparatively but little known, and where he had been informed a number of these birds were to be seen.

He landed beside a thicket, and had not advanced far from the shore when he came to a mound of sand and shells, with a slight mixture of black soil, the base resting on a sandy beach, only a few feet above high-water mark; it was enveloped in the large yellow-blossomed *Hibiscus*, was of a conical form, twenty feet in circumference at the base, and about five feet high. On asking the native what it was, he replied, "Ore-goorga Rambal" (jungle-fowl's house or nest). Mr. Gilbert scrambled up the sides of it, and found a young bird in a hole about two feet deep; the nestling,

apparently only a few days old, was lying on a few dry withered leaves. The native assured Mr. Gilbert that it would be of no use to look for eggs, as there were no traces of the old birds.

Mr. Gilbert took the utmost care of the young bird, placed it in a moderate-sized box, into which he introduced a large portion of sand, and fed it on bruised Indian corn, which it took rather freely. Its disposition was wild and intractable, and it effected its escape on the third day. While it remained in captivity, it was incessantly employed in scratching up the sand into heaps; and Mr. Gilbert remarks that the rapidity with which it threw the sand from one end of the box to the other was quite surprising for so young and small a bird, its size not being larger than that of a small quail. At night it was so restless that Mr. Gilbert was constantly kept awake by the noise it made in endeavouring to escape. In scratching up the sand the bird only employed one foot, and having grasped a handful, as it were, threw the sand behind it with but little apparent exertion, and without shifting its standing position on the other leg.

Mr. Gilbert continued to receive the eggs without any opportunity of seeing them taken from the ground until the beginning of February, when, on again visiting Knocker's Bay, he saw two taken from a depth of six feet in one of the largest mounds he had met with. In this instance the holes ran down in an oblique direction from the centre towards the outer slope of the hillock, so that although the eggs were six feet deep from the summit, they were only two or three feet from the side. "The birds," says Mr. Gilbert, in continuation, "are said to lay but a single egg in each hole, and after the egg is deposited the earth is immediately thrown down lightly until the hole is filled up; the upper part of the mound is then smoothed and rounded over.

It is easily known when a jungle-fowl has been recently excavating, from the distinct impression of its feet on the top and sides of the mound, and the earth being so lightly thrown over, that with a slender stick the direction of the hole is readily detected, the ease or difficulty of thrusting the stick down indicating the length of time that may have elapsed since the bird's operations. Thus far it is easy enough; but to reach the eggs requires no little exertion and perseverance. The natives dig them up with their hands alone, and only make sufficient room to admit their bodies, and to throw out the earth between their legs; by grubbing with their fingers alone they are enabled to follow the direction of the hole with greater certainty, which will sometimes, at a depth of several feet, turn off abruptly at right angles, its direct course being obstructed by a clump of wood or some other impediment.

Their patience is, however, often put to severe trials. In the present instance the native dug down six times in succession to a depth of at least six or seven feet without finding an egg, and at the last attempt came up in such a state of exhaustion that he refused to try again; but my interest was now too much excited to relinquish the opportunity of verifying the native's statements, and by the offer of an additional reward I induced him to try again; this seventh trial proved successful, and my gratification was complete when the native, with equal pride and satisfaction, held up an egg, and, after two or three more attempts, produced a second; thus proving how cautious Europeans should be of disregarding the narrations of these poor children of nature, because they happen to sound extraordinary or different from anything with which they were previously acquainted."

The jungle-fowl is almost exclusively confined to the dense thickets immediately adjacent to the sea-beach: it



THE SECRETARY BIRD.



THE KAGU.

appears never to go far inland, except along the banks of creeks. It is always met with in pairs or quite solitary, and feeds on the ground, its food consisting of roots, which its powerful claws enable it to scratch up with the utmost facility, and also of seeds, berries, and insects, particularly the larger species of *Coleoptera*. It is at all times a very difficult

bird to procure; for although the rustling noise produced by its stiff pinions when flying away be frequently heard, the bird itself is seldom to be seen. Its flight is heavy and unsustained in the extreme; when first disturbed it invariably flies to a tree, and on alighting stretches out its head and neck in a straight line with its body, remaining in

this position as stationary and motionless as the branch upon which it is perched; if, however, it becomes fairly alarmed, it takes a horizontal but laborious flight for about a hundred yards, with its legs hanging down as if broken.

The head and crest of the mound-making megapode are of a deep cinnamon-brown. The back of the neck

and all the under surface dark grey. Back and wings cinnamon-brown; tail-coverts dark chestnut; bill reddish-brown. Tarsi bright orange, with the exception of those of the toes, which are dark reddish-brown.

The kagu is an inhabitant of the island of New Caledonia, and bears some relationship to the cranes and bitterns.

THE STOLEN STEAMSHIP.



CORRESPONDENT of the *Times*, writing from Melbourne, relates the detection of one of the most ingenious and artfully-planned enterprises ever attempted in the wholesale stealing and swindling line.

"To begin at the beginning, it is necessary to state that some time back information was forwarded from Scotland to the Australian and other ports touching the mysterious disappearance from the Clyde of a steamer named the *Ferret*. The fact was announced under the curious form of 'Vessel lost, stolen, or strayed from the Clyde;' and in a Glasgow evening paper of February 12th an account of the transaction was given in substance as follows:—

In October last a man calling himself Walker—an ominous name in the minds of some foolish people—called on a leading ship chandlers' firm in Glasgow, professing to be a broker for a gentleman who contemplated taking for the health of his wife a six months' yachting cruise, and required the ship's stores necessary for the purpose. Satisfactory references were, as usual, required, and given. 'The vessel,' Walker said, 'had been chartered from the Highland Railway Company, and the charterer was alluded to as, although not expressly

stated to be, a Mr. Smith, a relative of the late First Lord of the Admiralty. The vessel, a steamer named the *Ferret*, was undergoing an overhaul in the yard of Messrs. Thomson, of Glasgow, preparatory to the projected trip, and the required goods, including an excellent supply of first-class wines from London, were duly delivered. The account, amounting to £1,490, was presented to Walker, who, it is said, gave his bill at three months' date, the signature of the Mr. Smith being also asked for and given. The bank, a London one, at which the bill was made payable, had been communicated with, and had replied that the acceptor of the bill had an account there. On the 16th of January last, before the maturity of the bill, the holders received some information which made them uneasy, and on the presentation of the bill when due it was dishonoured, the acceptor having previously withdrawn both his balance and himself. The 'references' were then attempted to be communicated with, but they had disappeared also.

Inquiries were, of course, next made about the *Ferret*. It appeared that on leaving the Clyde she had steamed south to Cardiff by the aid of a crew of 'runners,' who had there left her, the reputed owner, the captain, and some other officers alone remaining. A new crew and a fresh supply of coal having been