

The North Queensland and Naturalist

The Journal and Magazine of the Queensland Naturalists' Club
Established 1922

26th Year

Cairns, 1st September, 1957

No. 118

REQUIEM

WE ARE A FORTUNATE PEOPLE! To us in our time has come the privilege of knowing Hugo Flecker, and now that he has set out on the journey upon which we must all some day embark, we mourn
But should we?

I remember, many years ago, Doc told me that when a Roman builder had completed his work (usually in the winter, when the Italian sun was not at its strongest), he had to give a certificate that the edifice was "Sine cera." In effect, that the building was "without wax." A guarantee that in the building no wax had been rubbed into faults and cracks in the marble which would melt and run out in the summer's sun.

"Sine Cera" — "Without Wax" — Sincere

And sitting here at my typewriter, on just a day as the Doctor would have loved, with a blue haze on the hills, a pair of sunbirds setting up housekeeping on the loop of cord outside my window, the "chug-chug" of a pheasant-coucal coming in from a distant paddock, and the raucous cry of a spangled drongo vyeing for supremacy with the call of a friar-bird, I must apply Doc's own yardstick to my sentiments, even as I mourn his passing.

Am I sincere? Or am I being selfish in that I have no longer an inexhaustible fund of knowledge to draw on, without ever having the necessity of consulting a text-book?

Or have I really benefitted by having had the privilege of knowing such a man, in whom sincerity was a natural virtue?

If I have received something from the Doctor whilst he lived — if my life has been enriched by knowing him — then I must share the legacy he left.

A legacy of service. The privilege of perpetuating his memory by making his brain-child — the Club — even as he would have wished it to be.

It would be easy to write a flowery obituary for the Doc. To compose a panegyric for a great man, but, having known him, such would be superfluous.

Words are just words. It is by the sincerity of action we can pay the most fitting tribute to a sincere and humble friend whose very humility emphasised his greatness.

The sincerity of action

Each must take up some part of the burden he laid down. The botanist, the entomologist, the arachnidologist, the ornithologist, the marine biologist, the conchologist, the herpatologist — even the humble journalist can, with just pride, strive to attain the perfection in his chosen field so that the Club, benefitting by the example he set for us, will become even as he envisaged it over a quarter of a century ago — an authoratative body, recognised at world status.

It may, in fact it will, take the combined and organised efforts of up to ten specialists, assisted by all members of the Club, to carry on the work which Doc performed with apparent ease.

It is a legacy of work, of dedicated work, and a task which we, his friends, should be proud to undertake. — J.O., 1/8/57.

PRESERVATION OF REPTILES

By WILLIAM HOSMER, F.Z.S.

THE general interest in snakes has been gradually increasing since the recent publicity given to Australia's deadliest snake, the taipan. Specimens, living and dead, come from many localities in the north for positive identification. Unfortunately, many of the specimens are badly preserved, and consequently have to be discarded instead of being retained in the evergrowing museum collection. Quite recently a python of four feet was coiled tightly into a coffee jar and covered with methylated spirits, then transported many miles before reaching Cairns. If the sender of that python had been at the receiving end, I am sure that he would appreciate a few hints on the correct procedure for permanent preservation. The following method will be found most satisfactory. Although a little more complicated than the procedure quoted above, if a specimen be worth the trouble of preservation and shipment at all, then it is worth the care necessary for permanent storage as a museum specimen.

Specimens are best killed by drowning them in the preserving fluid, keeping them submerged in a cloth bag, or by injecting a little preservative in the region of the heart with a hypodermic syringe. Other methods not known to me are probably as effective or even more so, but whatever form is used, remember do not damage the specimen, particularly the head, as damaged specimens are difficult to check.

After killing the specimen, it is essential to inject preservative into the belly, starting from the tail and gradually working up the body to the neck, when fluid begins to run from the mouth, indicating that enough preservative has been injected. Should a syringe not be available for this purpose, a number of small slits may be made with a razor blade to ensure entry of the preservative into the body cavity. These slits should be made transverse to the belly scales, and should be about half as long as the interspaces between each cut. Remember that one or two slits are also necessary in the tail of any specimen exceeding two feet. After having done that part of the operation, place the specimen **UPSIDE DOWN** in a tray or dish of adequate space, and cover with the preserving fluid. Force out as much air as possible by running the fingers along the belly, pressing down from the tail end first. Remember, air pockets in the stomach are the chief cause of decomposition in preserved specimens, thus the removal of air is of prime importance. This having been thoroughly accomplished, arrange the specimen (still belly side up) in a suitable position, and allow to remain for a few hours. When re-examined, the specimen should be partly set or stiffened. The next procedure is to decide on a suitable container, a wide-mouthed jar or bottle will be found best, a fruit preserving bottle or pickle jar is ideal. The specimen should be carefully placed within so that there is no pressure of the body on the glass, and there should be a good amount of preservative in proportion to the volume of the specimen.

Now comes the most important part of the whole operation, so important, in fact, that without it, the rest of the work is in vain. I refer to "tagging" or labelling of the specimen. The rarest specimen is of little use to science if unaccompanied with the required data. Such a simple matter, yet so often omitted. The necessary data required is:—

(1) Locality in which the specimen was collected, which may be rendered, e.g., 2 miles north of Hartley Creek, or 3 miles west of Smithfield Post Office, etc.

(2) Date, and if space permits, time of day on which specimen was collected.

(3) Collector's name.

All of which should be written in PENCIL on a card or piece of paper and placed INSIDE the container. Outside labels are frequently lost, torn or damaged. If two or more specimens are included in the same container attach the label to each specimen by threading cotton through one of the belly scales and tying label securely.

With regard to the type of preservative to use, the most common, and easiest to procure is methylated spirit. Ethyl or grain alcohol is the preservative mostly used by museums for permanent storage, but the high cost of this fluid places it out of the reach of most private collectors. Formalin is most economical, since it should be broken down to 1 part formalin to 8 or 9 parts water for most specimens. The chief disadvantages are that it hardens the specimen, thus making examination difficult, also it causes the eyes of the person making the examination to run and smart. The head, or rather the head and two or three inches of neck are best preserved in cases where the specimen is too bulky for total preservation.

Once well preserved, the spirit may be emptied out of the container, and spirit moistened rag or absorbent cotton packed around the specimen for the purposes of transportation.

A RARE TREE FERN

Cyathea celebica Blume

By KEITH KENNEDY, Townsville

IN THE Check List of North Queensland Ferns, published by the North Queensland Naturalists' Club, is listed a tree fern, *Cyathea arachnoides* Hook., from Rockingham Bay, collected by Dallachy. That specimen was gathered many years back in 1867, and sent to von Mueller in Melbourne. Many years later, in 1909, another specimen was collected by R. F. Waller from the Evelyn Tableland rain forest. Another long passage of years, and then in 1954, Mrs. P. R. Messmeron, on a visit from Sydney, collected a specimen at Kidner's Creek, near the head of the Beatrice River. Following a request from Miss Mary Tindale, of the National Herbarium, Sydney, to keep a look out for this tree fern, I was fortunate enough at the end of 1956 to discover a fern growing 2900 feet up on the Paluma Range, and sent a frond down to the Herbarium.

The specific name *arachnoides*, which means spider web resemblance, because of the appearance of the underneath parts of the fronds are covered with white and rust coloured cob-webby hairs, was given in "Synopsis Filicum," by Hooker and Baker in 1865, but it is now known that it was previously recorded by Blume from Ternate in the Molucca Islands, when he named it *Cyathea celebica*, probably under the impression that Ternate was part of the Celebes Group. Under the scientific law of priority, *C. celebica* Bl. is now recognised as the correct name. According to Tindale in "Cyathea of Australia," the original material (holotype) is in the Herbarium at Djakarta (formerly Batavia) and is labelled in Blume's handwriting.

C. celebica has also been recorded from New Guinea, whence it probably migrated to North Queensland.

F. M. Bailey in "Queensland Flora," mentions that he has never seen any Queensland specimens, and took his descriptions from Bentham who, with von Mueller, examined Dallachy's specimens, which, however, were not fertile.

The largest one which I saw on the Paluma Range was not as tall as those reported from the Moluccas, which were said to reach a height of ten metres. It measured only 9.7 centimetres to where the fronds branch, but it was a mature plant for the fronds were covered with sori. Its diameter was thick in proportion to its height, being 17 centimetres, giving it a much more robust appearance than the slender *C. robertsiana* and *C. rebecca* growing in the vicinity. The stipes were armed with strong straight and curved spines, probably evolved for protection against browsing animals, and these make it difficult to saw off the base of the stipe as had been requested by the Herbarium authorities.

HOW WE CAUGHT THE TAIPAN

By J. McLOUGHLIN

ON ONE OF THE FIELD DAYS of the North Queensland Naturalists' Club, I was fortunate enough to take part in the capture of Queensland's well-known and most feared snake, the Taipan, *Oxyuranus scutellatus* Peters. The other four participants of the drama were Messrs L. Robichaux, A. Smith, J. Brophy and W. Hosmer.

We were diligently searching for reptiles along the upper reaches of Davies Creek, when, on hearing a slight movement in the brush I turned to see a large taipan gliding swiftly towards a large outcrop of rocks. My excited shout: "Taipan!" quickly brought my colleagues to the spot. Mr. Robichaux made two attempts to catch hold of the now fast-moving reptile's tail, but each time, the snake was a little swifter in movement. It was at this stage that I did a very foolish thing that nearly cost our much coveted prize its life. Observing that both Mr. Robichaux's attempts to secure the snake's tail were unsuccessful, I threw a small steel bar, which I had previously used to lift large rocks, and dealt it a glancing blow on the body. The snake turned and struck savagely at the bar, then quickly disappeared under a large rock. We then armed ourselves with forked sticks and arranged ourselves at various vantage points around the rock. I was advised to move back and keep my friends posted of the snake's movements. This I did, and to my surprise, looked into the face of a very annoyed taipan. On seeing a human being so close, it quickly drew back into the dark recess of the crevice, but I could still see its lower jaw moving nervously in a chewing motion.

It was unanimously decided to force the snake into the open. A long stick was inserted into the crevice, and as I was still chief observer, I informed Mr. Robichaux that the reptile was heading his way. The taipan moved slowly at first, then came out swiftly, striking repeatedly at Mr. Robichaux as it tried vainly to escape. Seeing its path blocked, it again went under the rock, only to reappear at the opposite end. We quickly converged on the snake's new escape point, and this time it was securely "pinned," while Mr. Hosmer picked it up and safely bagged it.

We were all very satisfied with the outcome, but unfortunately the taipan only lived two days in captivity before it died.

I think it worthy of note that all the attacking was done by us, and the snake only proved aggressive in defence of its life, as do all our other reptiles.

MEMBERS' EXCHANGE — BOTANICAL: Mrs. L. S. Cady, "Milford," Saddleback Road, Kiama, N.S.W., wishes to contact N.Q. Members.

WINNING ENTRY OF THE H. FLECKER NATURAL HISTORY
MEMORIAL MEDALLION FOR 1957**YELLOW - BREASTED SUNBIRD***(Cyrstostomus frenatus)*

THIS SMALL BIRD, a common sight to any North Queenslander, is also found in New Guinea, the Solomon and Admiralty Islands. Very few days have passed without my seeing these gay sprites in the vicinity of Cairns. The local name of "Weaver" is derived from the way it weaves cobwebs into its nest.

The sunbird is a type of honeyeater, and is about four inches long. With an olive green back and wings, a yellow stomach, and a dark, metallic blue breast forming a bib (which is exclusive to the male), the "Weaver" presents a picture of vivid beauty.

They hover over flowers in the true humming-bird style, while the slim, curved bill darts home for the nectar. Insects, caught on the wing, also form a large part of their diet.

While perched, their song is a short, pretty, tremulous warble, and a quick twitter is often uttered before they leave a twig.

The birds frequently build their nests near houses, and take little heed of the occupants. The nest is an oval-shaped, hanging structure, and is usually suspended from a twig, a piece of wire or rope, or a clothesline, at varying heights. It is made of pieces of bark, dry grasses, rootlets and dead leaves, which are closely woven with cobwebs. It is lined with fine grass, or any smooth material available. The birds enter through a hole well up on the side, which is overhung by a small protective hood. A cobweb tail hangs from the bottom of the nest.

Two or three eggs are laid, and are pale green with brown and light red spots.

At my last home, on the Barron River, a pair built annually on our open verandah, but their brood was repeatedly taken by snakes. Late one night, the sitting bird flew frantically around the verandah, until she managed to exit through the louvres. We placed a layer of cotton wool over the two young ones, then went back to bed. Fifteen minutes later another commotion began, so we lit the lamp and went to the verandah. The nest hung from a piece of rope, some two feet from a nearby clothes line. A large tree-snake was balancing on the line, and stretching across to the nest. As we watched, he sniffed all round the nest, then put his head inside. But he pulled it out again, and, I think, was rather puzzled as to the whereabouts of the brood. Unfortunately, when my elder brother attacked the snake with a broom, the nest was bumped. It fell. The young birds were still alive, so we patched the nest as much as possible, put the birds in, and put another layer of cotton wool over them. The parent birds came back at dawn, improved upon our mending, and continued as if nothing had happened. When on the nest, the female bird would let us touch her; as she sat with her head protruding from the entrance.

A yellow-breasted Sunbird is the most gay, beautiful bird imaginable.

JOE MACDOUGALL (14),
100 Bunda Street,
CAIRNS.

THE INITIATION CEREMONY OF THE TJAPUKAI TRIBE

By DOUG SEATON

THE TJAPUKAI PEOPLE occupied an area bounded by the Barron River from south of Mareeba to Kuranda and north to Port Douglas. They were rain forest people and the remnants of the tribe form the nucleus of the Mona Mona Mission. There are only three initiated men left that I know of, and they were initiated over forty (40) years ago, and as far as I can gather, were the last to be initiated.

The boys of the tribe were taken in hand by the father, grandfather or uncles, and taught bushcraft and hunting, and at the age of about 16 years they were given notice of the initiation. Extra food was gathered, special biyou (huts) were built, and the messenger with his wongaluken (message stick) was sent out to invite prominent men of friendly tribes. The leaders of the Yirkandji (Cairns area) used to travel up the Barron River by canoe to the place of initiation, which was a pool of the Barron just about where the cane train crosses the river, and the pool is referred to these days by the old people as the "Storywater," because this pool is the place where Damurrai had his legs snapped off by a crocodile in the Twapukai creator legend.

The boys were encouraged to feed heartily in starchy foods and were walked off their feet until they were ready to drop from weariness. Women and children were not allowed at the ceremony and they kept up a wailing at some distance from the event in the belief that it would prevent the boy from feeling pain. Each boy was allotted two to four holders and the men assigned to the job were near relatives, uncles, etc. The mother's elder brother was quite an important person during the ceremony. The boys were laid across the knees of the maternal uncle or some other close relative and the tribal marks were cut across the chest and upper stomach area by an uncle or other close relative using a sharp piece of white quartz called a parpulla. This parpulla was about 2 by 1½ inches in size, very thin, and had a backing on the upper edge of wax colored black with powdered charcoal. During the cutting the men kept up a churring noise so the boys would not feel the cutting — any blood from the cuts was carefully wiped off with a piece of paper bark to prevent it running into the earth where evil spirits would get it.

The boys then had the fat of the ningurra (freshwater eel) rubbed into the cuts to assist healing (no ashes or clay were placed in the cut by the Tjapuki people as was customary in other tribes). The boys were then compelled to remain in a crouched position during the healing and were fed on a diet of soft foods. The boys were given a short stick to scratch themselves with if they developed any itchy spots—they were not allowed to use their hands for scratching. They were not allowed to have long sleeps because of the belief that they might dream of a rainbow changing into a snake and this dream would cause them to start and so disturb the cuts. Sometimes the boys were also cut on the bicep just below the shoulder. Cuts across the chest and stomach were called Wattder and those on the upper arm Doomore. After the cuts had scabbed over (my informant Deeka, white fellow name Willie Courtney, told me that he had healed up in one week), the boys were then taken into the "story water" and the scabs were scrubbed off with sand by the old men, the boys were then considered to be men and later entitled to be married.

Until they were married they were not allowed to eat any meat, but could eat the flesh of fish or eels. The courtship, apart from arrangements made by parents, consisted of the man making presents to the girl's parents of spears or some useful utensil. These gifts were quietly placed outside the parents' hut. The actual marriage ceremony consisted of a sham fight so the buck could show his prospective bride what a great fellow he was, and a warrimar (dance). The girl and her mother then lit a fire in front of a hut they had previously built, the man took his bride by the hand and entered the hut, and the ceremony was over.

Any scars I have noticed on initiated men were only about one-quarter of an inch wide and raised up about the same. They extended almost across the chest and stomach, and there does not seem to be any special number of cuts.

GEOPELIA PLACIDA

By S. DEAN

NEVER to my knowledge has mention been made in the North Queensland Naturalists' journal of a most friendly bird that we in and around the Cairns district enjoy the constant companionship of.

Arriving in Cairns at the beginning of the year 1925, I was much intrigued by the sound of what was presumably a bird call which had a two-tone effect, sometimes with a bell-like clarity. At that time my hearing was fading from the effects of war service, and my sense of direction was confused, and the sound persisted in my thoughts and even into my slumber, so that it was some little time before I located the caller. Since then, the peaceful dove, as it is most usually named, has probably appealed to me more than any other of the many feathered friends I have in the Courthouse gardens. Though not an ornithologist, I am naturally a bird lover, as the birds are mainly the gardener's friend and I have visits from many, from the minah and willie wagtail right through to the larger jaborie and ibis. But the peaceful dove is always an attraction to the local residents and visitors from the south, not only for its call, but because of the mating cock's approach to the hen, with its constant bowing, with tail spread.

Though wary of possible danger, sometimes a crouching domestic cat, it will still flit and walk around with an aplomb that takes no notice of human approach. But though one may feed the ordinary rock pigeon on and out of the hand, one cannot do the same with the peaceful dove, unless it be a fledgeling from the nest. Therefore, I consider my close conquest worth reporting. A fully-grown Frangi Pani (*Plumeria*) which was at the side of the Courthouse, and which was blown over by Cyclone Agnes in 1956, had a centre crotch of three sturdy branches, and annually it provided a nesting place for the peaceful doves. Despite the activity of the adjacent court, the sitting hen would quietly carry on with its task of incubation, and I would occasionally approach on the blind side of my quarry and offer my hand with a few crumbs therein.

Over the years it is not creditable that it was the same hen that returned to this nest, but possibly grown fledgelings with the homing instinct. And then came the notable day when this particular hen, after repeatedly rejecting my advances, finally deigned to delightfully peck at a few crumbs so invitingly held out to her. For the rest of the nesting period I am convinced that milady looked forward for my visits of peaceful offerings. But came the cyclone and the end of an annual home for the peaceful dove, plus an attraction for me.

BARKING SPIDERS

Selenocosmia crassipes - Aviculariidae

By MAED MONATH

ONE of our ground spiders, *Selenocosmia crassipes*, was described by Professor Whitman, of Hobart — one of Australia's foremost authorities — as being the largest spider ever found in Australia. One was discovered at Bowen by a German lady naturalist about 1862. It belongs to the family Aviculariidae and is found among rocks, under chaffcutter boxes, and in other hiding places on the ground. Over a long period we have had hopes of securing a male, but up to date no male has been brought in.

The outer surface of their mandibles is furnished with spines and the inner surface is furnished with a set of horny plates of varying thickness and length, which are thrown into a state of vibration by being rubbed over the spikes on the mandible. This organ is equally well developed in both males and females and appears in the young soon after they emerge from the eggs.

When these spiders are irritated or alarmed, they raise themselves upon their hind legs and, by waving the palpi, scrape the plates against the spines on the mandibles, and produce a sound which has been described as resembling the dropping of shot upon a plate. The name barking spider has been applied to it on this account. It is probable that the sound thus produced acts for the benefit of the spider in warning other creatures.

The largest of another group, which includes the bird catching spiders, occurs in the northern parts of South America, where specimens almost equalling a rat in size are met with. They are nocturnal and will destroy and eat any living creature weak enough to be overpowered. Small birds have been found in their clutches.

DOCTOR FLECKER

IN RETROSPECT

By STAN DEAN

If intent of purpose, applied in good faith
By man, judged such shall he be.
If his knowledge creates an aura, a wraith
It is then, in this capacity
He then has attained, his ultimate goal
Though his earthly efforts, be done
Lost to us; his teachings, to us still remain
Forever denied by none.
We, The North Queensland Naturalists' Club
And Committee, who sat in commune
So oft with such a man, as a hub
In conclave, not always attune
But nonetheless view, a vacant chair
With thoughts, hard to reconcile.
"Tis a trust left to us, a responsible care
Whilst we feel, his indulgent smile
As we who nurse, this child of his brain
We believe he, would not mock
Our intent of purpose, to carry on.
We'll do our best, Old Doc.



Sunday Australian Printery