PRIONODURA NEWTONIANA, De Vis.

Newton's Bower-bird.

Prionodura newtoniana, De Vis, Proc. Linn. Soc. N. S. Wales, vii. p. 562 (1883).—Ramsay, Tabular List of Austr. B. p. 11 (1888).—De Vis, Proc. Roy. Soc. Queensl. 1889, p. 245.—id. Rep. Exped. Bellenden-Ker Range, p. 87 (1889).—Meston, t. c. p. 120.—Sclater, Ibis, 1890, p. 264.

Corymbicola mestoni, De Vis, MSS.: fide Meston, l. c.

This remarkable Bower-bird was described by Mr. De Vis from a single specimen procured in Queensland by Mr. Kendal Broadbent, and was at once recognized by its describer as belonging to a new genus. As with my Amblyornis subalaris, it has since transpired that the type specimen of Prionodura was a female or young male, the bird in neither case giving promise of having a brilliantly decorated adult male. The genus is closely allied to Amblyornis, but differs in the style of ornamentation in the male.

In a "Further Account of Prionodura newtoniana," Mr. De Vis has given the subsequent history of the species, and I cannot do better than reproduce his own words:—

"The bird was first discovered by Mr. K. Broadbent in the scrubs clothing the banks of the Tully River, a small river issuing from an angle formed by spurs of the Coast Range on its eastern aspect and entering the sea some little distance to the north of Cardwell. In the vale of the Herbert, on the western side of the principal spur and more immediately in the vicinity of Cardwell, the bird does not seem to occur, Mr. Broadbent having there searched for it more than once without success—lat. 18° is, therefore, probably its southern limit of range. Its true habitat is now ascertained to be the highlands north of the township of Herberton, where it was first observed by Mr. A. Meston in the course of a flying visit to the top of Bellenden-Ker. From near the summit of this mountain Mr. Meston brought down the skin of a male bird; and soon after, Mr. Broadbent, visiting Herberton in pursuit of the Tree-Kangaroo of that district, encountered the bird frequently about seven miles from town (fifty miles from the Bellenden-Ker), and collected a rich series of examples. How far northward the bird extends its range is as yet unknown.

"Prionodura is emphatically a Bower-bird. Both its observers in nature met with its bowers repeatedly and agree in representing them to be of unusual size and structure. From their notes and sketches it would appear that the bower is usually built on the ground between two trees, or between a tree and a bush. It is constructed of small sticks and twigs. These are piled up almost horizontally around one of the trees in the form of a pyramid, which rises to a height varying from four to six feet; a similar pile of inferior height, about eighteen inches, is then built round the foot of the other tree; the intervening space is arched over with stems of climbing plants, the piles are decorated with white moss, and the arch with similar moss mingled with clusters of green fruit resembling wild grapes. Through and over the covered run play the birds, young and old, of both sexes. A still more interesting and characteristic feature in the play-ground of this bird remains. The completion of the massive bower so laboriously attained is not sufficient to arrest the architectural impulse. Scattered immediately around are a number of dwarf hut-like structures—'gunyahs,' they are called by Broadbent, who says he found five of them in a space of ten feet diameter and observes that they give the spot exactly the appearance of a miniature blacks' camp. These seem to be built by bending towards each other strong stems of standing grass and capping them with a horizontal thatch of light twigs. In and out and around the 'gunyahs,' and from one to another, the birds in their play pursue each other to their hearts' content."

Mr. De Vis gives further notes in the Report of the Bellenden-Ker expedition:—" Found at all heights to the summit of Bellenden-Ker and in the scrubs around Herberton at a high elevation. In connection with the bower of this handsome bird we are indebted for an interesting fact to Broadbent's observation, that whereas towards the base of the mountain the bowers have the elaborate formation noticed lately in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland, at higher levels they gradually lose their distinctive character, and at the top are reduced to the simple trough-like form of the bower of the Regent- and Satin-birds, for which they might be mistaken were those birds inhabitants of the district. There is reason to believe that Mr. Meston has acquainted us with the nest and egg of this bird. While hearkening to the call of a male he noticed a rustling in a bush by his side, and looking in saw a bird which he says, without hesitation, was the female just disturbed from a nest built in a fork of the bush. The nest in question is cupshaped and loosely constructed of fibrous roots, lined with finer material of the same kind, and decorated with a little green moss on the outer side. The egg is 27 mm. long, 9 mm. broad, pale yellowish-grey, profusely freekled and blotched with pale brown."