

NECTARINIA AUSTRALIS, Gould.

Australian Sun-bird.

Nectarinia Australis, Gould in Proc. of Zool. Soc., July 23, 1850.—Jard. Cont. Orn. 1850.
Terridiri, Aborigines of Cape York.

I HAIL with great pleasure the discovery of a true *Nectarinia* in Australia, a discovery which, however, might have been expected, when we consider how short is the distance between the northern part of that country, and Timor and New Guinea, where these birds are known to abound.

I have carefully compared the present bird with all the species from those islands, and find it different from the whole of them. It offers a very close alliance to the *N. frænata* of the Celebes; it will be found, however, to differ from that species in its considerably larger size, in the mark above the eye being less conspicuous, and in the straighter form of the bill; I have therefore thought it but right to assign to it the name of *Australis*, as indicative of the only country in which it has yet been found. For my first knowledge of this species I am indebted to the researches of my late much-valued friend Captain Ince, R.N., who, while attached to H.M.S. Fly, paid unceasing attention to the natural history of the various parts of Australia visited by that vessel, and who, since his recent appointment to the command of H.M.S. Pilot in the China Seas, has paid equal attention to the ornithology of that region; but a short time has elapsed since his first interesting consignment reached me, and within the last few days (Feb. 19, 1851) the melancholy intelligence of his premature death has communicated a degree of grief to his friends which will be participated in by all who take an interest in the welfare of a most excellent officer and an ardent lover of natural history.

“This pretty Sun-bird,” says Mr. MacGillivray, “appears to be distributed along the whole of the north-east coast of Australia, the adjacent islands, and the whole of the islands in Torres Straits. Although thus generally distributed, it is nowhere numerous, seldom more than a pair being seen together. Its habits resemble those of the *Ptilotes*, with which it often associates, but still more closely to those of *Myzomela obscura*; like those birds, it resorts to the flowering trees to feed upon the insects which frequent the blossoms, especially those of a species of *Sciadophyllum*: this singular tree, whose range on the north-east coast and that of the Australian Sun-bird appears to be the same, is furnished with enormous spike-like racemes of small scarlet flowers, which attract numbers of insects, and thus furnish an abundant supply of food to the present bird and many species of the *Meliphagidæ*. Its note, which is a sharp, shrill cry, prolonged for about ten seconds, may be represented by ‘*Tsec-tsec-tsec-tss-ss-ss-ss.*’ The male appears to be of a pugnacious disposition, as I have more than once seen it drive away and pursue a visitor to the same tree; perhaps, however, this disposition is only exhibited during the breeding season. I found its nest on several occasions, as will be seen by the following extracts from my note-book:—

“Nov. 29, 1849. Cape York. Found two nests of *Nectarinia* to-day: one on the margin of a scrub, the other in a clearing. The nests were pensile, and in both cases were attached to the twig of a prickly bush: one, measuring seven inches in length, was of an elongated shape, with a rather large opening on one side close to the top; it was composed of shreds of *Melaleuca* bark, a few leaves, various fibrous substances, rejectamenta of caterpillars, &c., and lined with the silky cotton of the *Bombax Australis* so common in the neighbourhood. The other, which was similar in structure, contained a young bird, and an egg with a chick almost ready for hatching. The female was seen approaching with a mouthful of flies to feed the young, and the male was not far off. The egg was pear-shaped, generally and equally mottled with obscure dirty brown on a greenish grey ground.

“Dec. 4th.—Mount Ernest, Torres Straits. A nest of *Nectarinia* found to-day differs from those seen at Cape York in having over the entrance a projecting fringe-like hood composed of the panicles of a delicate grass-like plant. It contained two young birds, and I saw the mother visit them twice with an interval of ten minutes between; she glanced past like an arrow, perched on the nest at once, clinging to the lower side of the entrance, and looked round very watchfully for a few seconds before feeding the young, after which she disappeared as suddenly as she had arrived.”

The male has the crown of the head and upper surface olive-green; over and under the eye two inconspicuous marks of yellow; throat and chest steel-blue; remainder of the under surface fine yellow; irides chestnut; bill and feet black.

The female differs in having the whole of the under surface yellow, without a trace of the steel-blue gorget so conspicuous in the male.

The Plate represents two males and a female of the natural size.