

PLOTUS NOVÆ-HOLLANDIÆ, Gould.

New Holland Darter.

Plotus Novæ-Hollandiæ, Gould in Proc. of Zool. Soc., Part XV. p. 34.

THE habitat of this singular bird, so far as we yet know, is confined to the colonies of South Australia and New South Wales, where it is thinly but generally dispersed in all situations favourable to its habits; such as the upper parts of armlets of the sea, the rivers of the interior, extensive water-holes and deep lagoons. Shy and secluded in its habits, it usually takes up its abode in localities little frequented by man; seeks its prey in the water, dives with the greatest ease to the bottom of the deepest pools, and is as active in this element as can well be imagined. It ordinarily swims with a considerable portion of the body above the surface, but upon being disturbed immediately sinks it below the water, leaving the head and neck only to be seen, and which, from their form and the motion communicated to them by the action of swimming, presents a close resemblance to those of a snake. Its food consists of fish, aquatic insects, newts, frogs, &c. After feeding it perches on a snag of some fallen tree in the water, or on the naked branch of a tree in the forest nigh to its haunts, often on one of the greatest height, where it sits motionless for hours together: while thus perched it is much more easily approached and shot than on the water, where it is wary in the extreme.

Much variation exists in the colouring of the sexes; the female being, I believe, at all times distinguished by her buffy white breast and neck, which parts in the male are black. Young birds for the first and probably for the second year are the same colour as the female.

The male has an arrow-head-shaped mark of white on the throat; a broad stripe of the same colour commences at the base of the mandibles, extends for about four inches down the sides of the neck, and terminates in a point; head, neck, and all the upper surface of the body greenish black, stained with brown, and with deep rusty red on the centre of the under side of the throat; under surface deep glossy greenish black; wings and tail shining black; all the coverts with a broad stripe of dull white occupying nearly the whole of the outer and a part of the inner web, and terminating in a point; scapularies lanceolate in form, with a similar shaped mark of white down the centre, and with black shafts, the scapular nearest the body being nearly as large as the secondaries, and with the outer web crimped and the inner web with a broad stripe of dull white close to the stem; the secondaries nearest the body with a similar white stripe close to the stem on the outer web; centre tail-feathers strongly, and the lateral ones slightly crimped; orbits naked, fleshy, protuberant and of a yellowish olive, mottled over with brown specks; next to the pupil of the eye is a narrow ring of dull orange-buff, to this succeeds another ring of marbled buff and brown, and to this an outer circle of orange-buff; naked skin at the base of the lower mandible wrinkled and yellow; upper mandible olive, under mandible dull yellow, both becoming brighter towards the base; feet yellowish flesh-colour, becoming brown on the upper part of the outer toes.

The female has the crown of the head, back of the neck and upper part of the back blackish brown, each feather margined with greyish white; throat and all the under surface buffy white; the remainder of the plumage like the male, but with the white marks on the wing-coverts larger and more conspicuous; irides ornamented with a beautiful lacework of brown, the interstices being buff; orbits, naked skin at the base of the bill, and throat orange-yellow; feet pale yellow.

The Plate represents the two sexes about two-thirds of the natural size.