TRIBONYX VENTRALIS, *Gould.*

Black-tailed Tribonyx.

Gallinula ventralis, Gould in Proc. of Zool. Soc., Part IV. p. 85.
Tribonyx ventralis, Gould in App. to Grey's Trav. in Australia, vol. ii. p. 420.—List of Birds in Brit. Mus. Coll., Part III. p. 122.
Bel-gar-bĕ-jal, Aborigines of the lowland, and
Nŏl-yang, Aborigines of the mountain districts of Western Australia.
Moor-hen of the Colonists.

Since my attention has been directed to the ornithology of Australia, I have received this species from every part of the country southward of the 25th degree of south latitude, but I have not yet seen it from any part of Van Diemen's Land, that country being in all probability too cold and ungenial for its habits.

Although in outward contour and general appearance this bird bears a great resemblance to the Gallinules or Water-hens, it will be found on comparison to possess a very different structure, particularly in the form of the tarsi and toes, and of the tail, and in its economy it differs from them quite as much as it does in form. Its migratory movements are very uncertain, great numbers occasionally visiting parts of the country where it had seldom before been seen, and retiring again to some distant unknown locality as suddenly as it appeared. We are naturally led to inquire whence they came, and anxiously to desire a more intimate knowledge of that great *terra incognita* the interior of the country, by which means alone can the mystery be solved.

John Hutt, Esq., Governor of Western Australia, informs me that in the neighbourhood of Perth the *Tribonyx ventralis* "makes its appearance suddenly in large flocks at a time," and asks, "Is this not a proof of there being an oasis of good land in the interior? This bird invaded the settlers' fields and gardens in the month of May 1833 in amazing numbers; it had not been seen before, and has hardly been seen since."

Mr. Gilbert states, "that upon this occasion it visited the Swan River colony in myriads, treading down and destroying whole fields of corn in a single night. The natives not having seen them before attributed their appearance to the settlers, and for a long time termed them the 'White-men's birds': after the harvest was over they nearly all disappeared as suddenly as they arrived. The natives of the banks of the Upper Swan, on making inquiries respecting these birds of some of the tribes of the interior, were told they came from the north."

I frequently met with the bird myself during my journey into the interior of New South Wales; it was tolerably abundant on the banks of the Mokai in the month of December 1839, but not in such numbers as particularly to attract my attention. When I first saw it I was much struck with its grotesque appearance, as it strutted along the bank of the river with its tail quite erect like that of a domestic fowl. Although the herbage on the river-sides was very scanty, and the plains were so parched that scarcely a blade of grass was to be seen, it readily eluded pursuit by its amazing powers of running, and secreting itself beneath the roots of the large trees or the shelving of the bank. I never saw it take wing, and I believe that it rarely resorts to flight for security.

It breeds in November; the nest, which is formed of dead soft grasses and rushes, being placed on the ground among the long grass-like rushes of the river-side. The eggs are seven in number, of a cream-colour, thinly sprinkled with irregularly-shaped spots of chestnut-red, some of which appear as if beneath the surface of the shell; they are an inch and a half long by one inch and an eighth broad.

The stomach is extremely thick and muscular; and the food consists of grain, seeds, and other vegetable substances, shelled mollusks, insects, &c.

Throat, breast and under surface dark bluish grey; flank-feathers black, with an oblong mark of white near their extremities; lower part of the abdomen and under tail-coverts black; all the upper surface brownish olive; primaries brown, the outer one margined externally with white; tail black; irides fine orange; upper mandible beautiful pea-green, becoming rather paler at the tip; base of the lower mandible light reddish orange, the tip like that of the upper; legs and feet deep brick-red.

The Plate represents the two sexes of the natural size.