

Neville W. Caley

1886 - 1950



Most members will be familiar with Neville W. Caley's best known work, the field guide, *What Bird Is That?* which probably did more to raise the profile of our Australian birds with the general public than any other.

Who then was the man behind this work?

Neville William Caley was born at Yamba, in NSW, on the 7th of January 1886. His father, Neville H. P. Caley, was well known for his paintings of game-birds, and kookaburras, magpies and blue wrens. However, Caley senior's work had artistic rather than ornithological value.

Early in his career Neville Jnr. mainly painted just pretty pictures of birds; but, as he developed his interest in ornithology his work became more technical and assured. In 1925 he produced some very attractive plates of both birds and eggs for the first *Australian Encyclopaedia* (1925-6).

It was these plates that gave his career the fillip needed to spur him on, and he soon came to be considered the leading painter of Australian birds of the era. Books soon became his chief means of distributing his work. The first of these was *What Bird is That?* (1931), in which every Australian bird was illustrated in colour and which ran to many editions. Indeed, it is still being updated and reprinted to this day. One of the special features of *What Bird is That?* is the arrangement of birds by habitat rather than the traditional arrangement by species, thus making it easier to identify them in the field.

Other works soon followed: *Finches in Bush and Aviary* (1932), *Budgerigars in Bush and Aviary* (1933), *Australian Parrots* (1938), and *The Fairy Wrens of Australia* (1949). Caley also executed the colour plates for Waterhouse's *What Butterfly is That?* (1932), and those in Troughton's *Furred Animals of Australia* (1941).

Caley's colour plates of the Fairy Wrens in their natural habitat are outstanding, and are, in my opinion, by far his best work. Not only are the birds depicted true to life but the plants in which he places them are botanically correct.

Apart from the plants accompanying his Fairy Wrens, his botanical output was rather limited, but he did publish a booklet '*Our Flowers*' in 1920.

In his youth Cayley took a leading part in the founding of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia. He was a long-time officer of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (President 1936-7) and of the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales (President 1932-3). He died in Sydney on the 17th of March 1950.

R.V.C.

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BIRD KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA