

Early Hunter Region avian records

Part 4. 1951-1980 Articles in *The Emu*

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Articles about 1951-1980 Hunter Region birdlife appearing in *The Emu* have been reviewed. A bibliography of all the articles is included. Possible changes to the distribution range for some species since the 1950s have been discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The Hunter Region has long been known for its importance for Australian birds (Morris 1975; Cooper *et al.* 2014, 2016; Stuart 2009, 2013). A useful source of information about birds of the Region has been the journal *The Emu*, published since 1901 by BirdLife Australia (BLA) and its predecessor organisations e.g. the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (Robin 2001). For almost eight decades, *The Emu* contained many papers and short notes dealing with aspects of Hunter Region ornithology. However, since the mid 1970s it had relatively few regionally focussed articles and for several years prior, its importance for documenting regional birdlife had diminished considerably (for example, see Morris 1975; Cooper *et al.* 2014, 2016).

The objective of this present paper is to provide an overview of information about Hunter Region birdlife reported in *The Emu* for the period 1951-1980. Parts 1 and 2 in this series (Stuart 2009, 2013) reviewed *Emu* articles appertaining to the Hunter Region for the periods 1901-1925 and 1926-1950 respectively. Historical records of shorebirds, sourced from a range of publications, were reviewed in Part 3 (Stuart 2014).

It should be noted that articles in *The Emu*, taken in isolation, potentially create a misleading view of Hunter Region birdlife in the review period. A more complete perspective requires a review of all applicable literature and is outside the scope of the present paper.

METHODS

Approach taken

In reviews of 1901-1925 and 1926-1950 *Emu* articles (Stuart 2009, 2013), the Hunter Region was considered as six sub-regions; papers relating to each sub-region were discussed separately. That approach seemed less suitable for the present review. Although there was a steady stream of reports with a local focus, several significant papers presented information for a species or selection of species from a regional or national perspective. Discussion would have been repetitive if these were analysed at a sub-regional level, hence a different approach was taken. Firstly, reports relating to the various guilds (waterbirds, bush birds, etc) have been reviewed. Other sections deal with apparent changes in range or abundance, and with reports of rare or uncommon birds. A bibliography has been provided which lists every article relevant to the Hunter Region that appeared in *The Emu* between 1951 and 1980.

Nomenclature

This paper uses the taxonomy of BLA's Working List of Australian Birds V2.1 (BirdLife Australia 2018a). All the 1951-1980 articles in *The Emu* used then-current versions of the taxonomic list; amendments have been made wherever necessary.

THE 1951-1980 LITERATURE

Waterbirds

Heavy rain in 1950-51 created huge swamps in the Kurri Kurri / Maitland area and around Hexham; the latter was regularly surveyed during train journeys through the area (D'Ombra 1951). Very large numbers of Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa*, Grey Teal *Anas gracilis*, Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*, Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*, and White-faced Heron *Egretta*

novaehollandiae were present, and also lesser but substantial numbers of many other waterfowl species (D'Ombraïn 1951). Noteworthy records included small numbers of Musk Duck *Biziura lobata* and Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, and many small parties of Hoary-headed Grebe *Poliiocephalus poliocephalus*, Banded Lapwing *Vanellus tricolor* and Black-tailed Native-hen *Tribonyx ventralis*. Also, there were many sightings of Nankeen Night-Heron *Nycticorax caledonicus*, which originated from a large colony near Beresfield (D'Ombraïn 1951). Intriguingly, D'Ombraïn reported many breeding records around Hexham for the Hoary-headed Grebe, which now is considered a bird of passage with no modern evidence of any breeding attempts (Stuart 2017).

Arguably the most interesting Hexham record was of a pair of Australasian Bittern *Botaurus poiciloptilus* which habituated to the train's passage and often could be observed very close to the track (D'Ombraïn 1951).

A pair of Black Bittern *Ixobrychus flavicollis* nested on the Paterson River near Tocal in 1954-55; three advanced young were in the nest in early January 1955 (D'Ombraïn 1955). In December 1959 there was a very large influx of Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* at drying swamps in the Hinton, Seaham and Paterson areas. Flocks of over 1,000 birds were often seen; prior to that it had seldom been recorded in the Hunter Valley (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962).

The Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* was first recorded in the lower Hunter Valley in 1930; seven birds were estimated to be present in the mid-1960s (Bell 1963; Salmon 1965). To the north, another 5-8 birds were believed to be in the Tea Gardens - Myall River area (Salmon 1965). A pair successfully bred at Tea Gardens in 1959 (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962). Salmon (1965) was uncertain if two birds recorded at Wallis Lake were additional or part of the Tea Gardens population. However, there were other reports of birds at Tuncurry near the mouth of the lake (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962).

Hobbs & Kavaney (1962) reported an influx of Great Crested Grebe to Smiths Lake near Bungwahl beginning in early 1960. The peak count was 23 birds in July. They commented that it was an uncommon species near the coast. Strangely, they did not mention D'Ombraïn's report of small numbers of them present in the swamps around Hexham in 1951.

Shorebirds

Large numbers of shorebirds are known to have been present (in the Hunter Estuary in particular) in the 1960s and 1970s (Stuart 2014). However, there were very few reports of Hunter Region shorebirds in *The Emu*. It seems that birdwatchers mostly were using other forums to report their shorebird counts (see Stuart 2014 for details).

Over-wintering Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* in the Hunter Estuary and at Forster in the 1960s were mentioned briefly, and the presence of small numbers of Australian Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris* in Port Stephens was recorded (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962).

Surveys in 1972 around Myall Lakes were focussed on terrestrial habitats and did not assess areas where shorebirds might occur (Recher 1975). However, an Appendix to the report included many shorebirds amongst a list of all birds known to have been recorded near Myall Lakes and Forster. The list was based upon numerous unpublished sources and some published ones, and spanned many decades (Recher 1975). More than 20 shorebirds were listed, including rarities such as Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus*, Little Curlew *Numenius minutus* and Wandering Tattler *Tringa incana*. No additional details were supplied for any of the historical records.

Recher (1975) listed Latham's Snipe *Gallinago hardwickii* in a table of breeding residents of the Myall Lakes. This may just have been a case of clumsy wording. Latham's Snipe is a non-breeding visitor to Australia; it breeds in Japan and eastern mainland Asia (Marchant & Higgins 1993; BirdLife Australia 2018b).

Woodland and rainforest birds

The most comprehensive report of the era documented surveys by RAOU members in 1972 of areas under consideration for inclusion into the proposed Myall Lakes National Park (Recher 1975). Eight terrestrial habitat types were surveyed, producing a list of 81 species. One surprising record was Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo *Calyptrorhynchus banksii*, reported to have been present in two of the eight habitat types (and listed as breeding). This species does not appear on the modern Hunter Region checklist (Stuart 2017). All the other listed species fit with modern understandings; some noteworthy omissions will be discussed in a later section.

An Appendix to Recher's report listed all species known to have been recorded near Myall Lakes and Forster, spanning many decades and based on published and unpublished sources (Recher 1975). Included were Masked *Artamus personatus* and White-browed Woodswallow *A. superciliosus*, Flame *Petroica phoenicea* and Scarlet Robin *P. multicolor* and Hooded Robin *Melanodryas cucullata*. All are interesting easterly records from a modern perspective. Also, there were some surprising records, such as Marbled Frogmouth *Podargus ocellatus* and Large-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus macrurus*, both now known only from northern Queensland and surely these were mis-identifications.

A review of the status of many woodland and rainforest birds in the 1960s noted that the Emu *Dromaius novaehollandiae* was still present in the Myall Lakes area (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962). The 1962 review also provided many insights into apparent changes in distribution and/or abundance that have occurred since the 1960s. These will be discussed in later sections.

In 1958, the Region experienced an influx of Swift Parrot *Lathamus discolor* and the Tasmanian subspecies of Striated Pardalote (the Yellow-tipped Pardalote) *Pardalotus striatus striatus* (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962; Hindwood & Sharland 1964). These influxes were associated with an extremely heavy infestation of lerp psyllids (Hindwood & Sharland 1964).

The Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita* was exterminated in the Williams River area (presumably by agriculturists), and then was absent for several decades until the late 1950s when a flock of c. 100 birds reappeared (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962).

Although there were several other articles in *The Emu* about bush birds in the Hunter Region, these usually were anecdotal in their nature and provided very little insight into the overall state of species in the Region (for example, Hyem 1953, 1956; Lane 1966). An exception was a report of a Rufous Songlark at Muswellbrook in winter 1949, which also noted the frequent summer records for that area (Doyle 1953).

Seabirds

Hindwood & D'Ombraïn (1960) visited islands of the Broughton Group in December 1959. They confirmed that Wedge-tailed *Ardenna pacifica* and Short-tailed Shearwater *A. tenuirostris*, Silver Gull *Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae* and Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii* were breeding. They also found two Sooty Shearwater *A. grisea* in burrows on Little Broughton Island; however breeding was not confirmed during their visit¹. It is interesting that they reported Little Broughton Island had the larger concentration of breeding birds and that shearwaters bred in limited numbers on Broughton Island. The authors stated that Little Penguin *Eudyptula minor* bred in considerable numbers on Cabbage Tree Island. They found some in burrows on Broughton Island but could not confirm breeding. Hindwood & D'Ombraïn also searched without success for White-faced Storm-petrel *Pelagodroma marina* burrows. However, a local fisherman told them that some years earlier he had found some at Bassett Hull's 1910 site of "hundreds of burrows" (Bassett Hull 1911).

One year later, a non-breeding Buller's Shearwater *A. bulleri* was found in a burrow on Cabbage Tree Island² (D'Ombraïn & Gwynne 1961). Thus, four species of shearwater were using islands off Port Stephens in 1959-1960 (also see Lane 1962). Also, the Gould's Petrel *Pterodroma leucoptera* continued to breed on Cabbage Tree Island although the size of the colony was thought to be small (Gibson & Sefton 1957).

A pair of Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* bred on Moon Island off Swansea in 1958-59 (Gwynne & Gray 1959). This was unusual as there were no prior Hunter Region breeding records (McGill 1955c). Records of what now are considered rare or uncommon seabirds are detailed in **Table 1**. Mostly these were near-coastal records e.g. occurring after storms. There did not seem to have been any pelagic surveys. Supporting this conclusion, a review of Grey-faced Petrel *Pterodroma gouldi* records mentioned no Hunter Region sightings (Hindwood 1957b); now it is often recorded at the continental shelf off Port Stephens (Stuart 2017).

¹ Sooty Shearwater was first reported breeding on Broughton Island in 1914 (Rohu 1914). There now are known breeding colonies on Boondelbah, Broughton and Little Broughton Islands (Cooper *et al.* 2014).

² At the time this was only the second live record for NSW (see Cooper *et al.* 2014 for details).

Table 1. Records of uncommon Hunter Region seabirds reported in *The Emu* during 1951-1980

Species	Date	Details	Reference
Pacific Gull <i>Larus pacificus</i>	Jan 1943	Single bird in Manning Estuary	McGill 1955c
Kelp Gull <i>Larus dominicanus</i>	Nov 1958 – Jan 1959	Three birds at Moon Island including a breeding pair	Gwynne & Gray 1959
	1958-1959	Up to three birds often recorded in the Hunter Estuary and further south	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Sooty Tern <i>Onychoprion fuscatus</i>	Jan 1954	Single bird at Shoal Bay	Sefton 1958
White-winged Black Tern <i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	Jan 1960	Single bird at Swansea	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
	Jan 1968	Single bird off Newcastle	Rogers 1969
Black Tern <i>Chlidonias niger</i>	Jan 1968	Single bird off Newcastle	Rogers 1969
Common Tern <i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Dec 1951	Single bird off Newcastle	Hitchcock 1965
	Jan 1952	Three records off Newcastle	
Red-tailed Tropicbird <i>Phaethon rubricauda</i>	Feb 1952	Two birds off Port Stephens	D’Ombrain 1952
	Jan 1955	Single bird off Broughton Island	Hindwood 1955b
White-tailed Tropicbird <i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	Feb 1956	Single bird inland near Bulahdelah	Hindwood 1957a
Wilson’s Storm-Petrel <i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	Sep 1941	Single bird off Port Stephens	Serventy 1952
White-chinned Petrel <i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>	Dec 1968	Beach-washed along Newcastle Bight	Holmes 1969
Buller’s Shearwater <i>Ardenna bulleri</i>	Dec 1960	Single bird on Cabbage Tree Island	D’Ombrain & Gwynne 1961
Sooty Shearwater <i>Ardenna grisea</i>	Dec 1959	Two birds on Broughton Island	Hindwood & D’Ombrain 1960
Lesser Frigatebird <i>Fregata ariel</i>	Feb 1957	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three birds off Cabbage Tree Island • One bird inside Port Stephens • Two birds off Broughton Island 	Hindwood 1957c
Brown Booby <i>Sula leucogaster</i>	May 1954	Single bird off Port Stephens	Hindwood 1955a

Both the Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and Australian Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon macrotarsa* were reported to occur only in small numbers in the Region (Hitchcock 1965; Hobbs & Kavaney 1962). However, this was in contradiction to near-contemporaneous reports of notably higher counts for both (Morris 1975). Morris commented that the Australian Gull-billed Tern was a common visitor to the Hunter Estuary in winter.

Records of uncommon and rare birds

The 1951-1980 literature included several reports of species which are now considered uncommon or rare in the Hunter Region or to be accidental visitors. Nowadays, all reports of these species are closely reviewed before being accepted. That was not always the case for older records. A list of 1951-1980 reports is presented in **Table 2** (excepting seabirds, which all appear in **Table 1**). This does not imply that they have been accepted as confirmed records although in most cases the birds almost certainly were correctly identified.

DISCUSSION

It has not seemed feasible to prepare a list of all the birds recorded in the Hunter Region after 1951. Whereas in 1901-1950 there were many reports in *The Emu* that included annotated bird lists for a specific part of a subregion (Stuart 2009, Stuart 2013), this hardly ever happened in the post-1950 period.

Within **Table 2** is a report of a pair of Red-backed Button-quail *Turnix maculosus* at Diamond Head in 1959. There have been more recent records from this general area (Stuart 2017) and it seems worthwhile to investigate if Crowdy Bay National Park has a resident population.

McGill reported some records of the Black-headed (Striated) Pardalote *Pardalotus striatus melanocephalus* (**Table 2**; McGill 1966). Those reports have recently been questioned (Stuart 2018).

Table 2. Rare and unusual birds (excepting seabirds) for the Hunter Region based on reports in *The Emu* during 1951-1980.

Species	Date	Details	Reference
Superb Fruit-dove <i>Ptilinopus superbus</i>	Dec 1918	An immature female at Belltrees homestead (via Scone)	Hindwood 1953
Black-eared Cuckoo <i>Chalcites osculans</i>	Feb 1959	A single bird near Dungog	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Oriental Cuckoo <i>Cuculus saturatus</i>	Feb 1961	A single bird at Fosterton	Dowling 1962
Black-tailed Native-hen <i>Tribonyx ventralis</i>	1951	Common around Hexham after heavy rain	D'Ombra 1951
Banded Lapwing <i>Vanellus tricolor</i>	1951	Common around Hexham after heavy rain	D'Ombra 1951
Red-backed Button-quail <i>Turnix maculosus</i>	Dec 1959	A pair at Diamond Head	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Glossy Ibis <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	pre-1951	Some records from the Hexham area	D'Ombra 1951
	Feb 1960	Nine birds at Hinton	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Black Kite <i>Milvus migrans</i>	May 1960	A single bird at Dungog	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Spotted Harrier <i>Circus assimilis</i>	July 1960	A single bird at Pipers Bay Forster	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Barking Owl <i>Ninox connivens</i>	Dec 1959	Regularly at Dungog and Chichester State Forest	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Black-headed (Striated) Pardalote <i>Pardalotus striatus melanocephalus</i>	1959	A pair was nesting near Taree. Prior records from around the Manning River were also mentioned.	McGill 1966
Ground Cuckoo-shrike <i>Coracina maxima</i>	Apr 1959	Two birds near Dungog	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
	pre-1959	A single bird at Barrington	
Common Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>	Sep 1959	A pair at Dungog (for ~5 months)	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962

The presence or absence of the Eastern Bristlebird *Dasyornis brachypterus* in the Hunter Region was uncertain. Chisholm's account of the diaries of the early 20th century collector S.W. Jackson stated that Jackson had found some at Wootton in 1922 (Chisholm 1958). However, a review of the status of Eastern Bristlebird (Chaffer 1954) made no mention of Jackson's records. Possibly they had not yet surfaced into the public domain. Jackson's diaries were unpublished until Chisholm's 1958 summary of them.

Apparent changes in distribution and abundance

Based solely on reports in *The Emu*, some species which we now find to be relatively common and/or widely distributed in the Region were not always so. Conversely, some species appear to have decreased in abundance in modern times or their ranges have contracted. The more noteworthy of the apparent changes are reviewed in this section.

Apparent range extensions

Table 3 summarises the first records for 14 species in new parts of the Region. Mostly these were

cases of northern birds extending their range southwards or of inland birds extending their range eastwards. An exception was the Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*. A small colony established in Newcastle in the 1950s (Hone 1978); subsequent records from some Newcastle suburbs possibly originated from that initial colony.

Hobbs & Kavaney (1962) reported Hawks Nest to be the southern limit for the White-breasted Woodswallow *Artamus leucorhynchus* (**Table 3**). This is a good example of the limitations from only considering articles from *The Emu*: the species was well known to breed at Wyong to the south of the Hunter Region in the 1960s and 1970s (Morris 1975).

From the surveys of sites in the proposed Myall Lakes National Park, carried out in mid October 1972 (Recher 1975), there were three noteworthy omissions from the species list. Eastern Koel *Eudynamis orientalis*, Channel-billed Cuckoo *Scythrops novaehollandiae* and Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus moluccanus* were not recorded. All three now commonly occur in the area (Stuart 2017); they have expanded their ranges since 1972 (Cooper *et al.* 2016).

Table 3. Range limits and range extensions based on reports in *The Emu* during 1951-1980

Species	Date	Details	Reference
Australian Brush-turkey <i>Alectura lathami</i>	Nov 1957	Nesting record from Buttai which was now considered the southern range limit	Kavaney 1958
	Oct 1958	A pair near Ourimbah extended the southern range by ~30 km	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Crested Pigeon <i>Ocyphaps lophotes</i>	1943	First record in Taree	Breckenridge 1952
	1958	A single bird at Taree	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
	July 1960	A few birds were near Forster	
	1962	Maitland was considered the eastern range limit in the Hunter Valley	
Bar-shouldered Dove <i>Geopelia humeralis</i>	1962	Hawks Nest was considered the southern range limit	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Channel-billed Cuckoo <i>Scythrops novaehollandiae</i>	Dec 1952	First record for Maitland	D'Ombra 1952
Galah <i>Eolophus roseicapilla</i>	1962	Hinton was considered the eastern range limit	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo <i>Cacatua galerita</i>	1962	The Williams River area was considered the eastern range limit	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Striped Honeyeater <i>Plectorhyncha lanceolata</i>	1962	Belford was considered the eastern range limit but a coastal population also existed	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Blue-faced Honeyeater <i>Entomyzon cyanotis</i>	1962	Woodville was considered the eastern range limit	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Mangrove Gerygone <i>Gerygone levigaster</i>	July 1960	Some birds at Darawank represented a southern range extension of ~50 km	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Western Gerygone <i>Gerygone fusca</i>	Sep 1955	Hollydene was now considered the eastern range limit	Hoskin 1957
	Oct 1956	A pair was nesting near Scone ~50 km north-east of Hollydene	
	July 1959	Birds in Belford area represented an eastern range extension of ~70 km	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Grey-crowned Babbler <i>Pomatostomus temporalis</i>	1962	Its spread through the lower Hunter Valley and elsewhere was discussed	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
White-breasted Woodswallow <i>Artamus leucorhynchus</i>	1962	Hawks Nest was considered the southern range limit	Hobbs & Kavaney 1962
Varied Triller <i>Lalage leucomela</i>	Dec 1952	Six birds at Harrington – first records from south of Clarence River	McGill 1954
Common Myna <i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	1950s	Some birds at Newcastle steelworks	Hone 1978
	1970	First records at Cardiff & Edgeworth	

Apparent range contractions

The anecdotal nature of many 1951-1980 reports about any particular species makes it difficult usually to differentiate whether lower numbers in modern times are due to range contractions or to changes in abundance. However, the Zebra Finch *Taeniopygia guttata* was described as being common in many parts of the Hunter Valley and Taree (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962) – it appears now to be absent from much of that range (Stuart 2017). Also, Southern Whiteface *Aphelocephala leucopsis* was recorded south as far as Cessnock and also occurred in small numbers around Dungog,

Brookfield, Stroud and Gloucester (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962). The only modern records are from locations around Goulburn River National Park and Ulan (Stuart 2017).

Apparent changes in abundance

The Regent Honeyeater *Anthochaera phrygia* was present in large numbers (60+ birds) at Cooranbong in early February 1958 (Kavaney 1958b). Although there are occasional modern records from the Cooranbong-Morriset area, these have involved small numbers of birds in autumn-winter (Stuart 2017).

Both the Red-capped Robin *Petroica goodenovii* and Hooded Robin *Melanodryas cucullata* were considered common birds of the Hunter Region in the 1960s (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962). The former was found east as far as Branxton (with winter incursions to Maitland) while the latter was described as a common bird occurring in nearly all suitable open-forest habitat.

In 1955, the Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* was described as the rarest of Australia's egret species (the Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* was not even in consideration at that time³) and the author provided tips for how to identify them (McGill 1955a). The Pink-eared Duck *Malacorhynchus membranaceus* was considered a rare visitor near the coast, such that a sighting of four birds near Hinton in 1960 was considered noteworthy (Hobbs & Kavaney 1962).

CONCLUSIONS

The Emu for about eight decades (1901 to around 1975) was a rich source of information about birds in the Hunter Region. It underwent a change in direction from the 1970s onwards, and rarely since then has contained much locally or regionally focussed information. However, around that same time other journals began to appear that were able to at least partially fill the gap. For example, the Newcastle Flora and Fauna Society's journal *Hunter Natural History* was published from 1969-1980 and contained many articles about Hunter Region birds. Similarly, *Australian Birds* (published by the NSW Field Ornithologists Club) first appeared in 1966 and was an important source *inter alia* of Hunter Region information (and NSW more generally) for around four decades. Since 2009, *The Whistler* has become a major repository for news about local bird studies. The Hunter Region's importance for Australian birds continues to be well documented.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Below are details for every article relevant to the Hunter Region appearing in *The Emu* during 1951-1980, and for other cited references. Collectively the *Emu* articles gave insights into then-current local ornithological understandings; however not all of them were referenced in discussion.

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