Notes on the White-Winged Chough

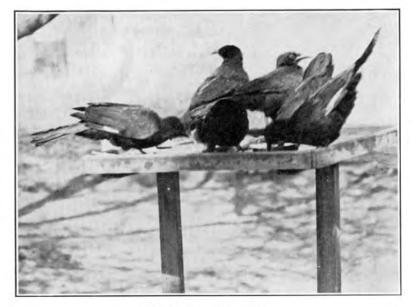
By HUGH A. C. LEACH, R.A.O.U., Castlemaine, Vic.

A large flock of White-winged Choughs (Corcorax melanorhamphus), fifty or more, of these interesting birds frequent the school-ground at Barker's Creek almost throughout the year. Their habits are both quaint and charming, and, though I have watched them hundreds of times, they never weary me. They appear to make a play of life and resemble children in their joyous abandon. "Follow the leader" is a favourite pastime. The birds will be earnestly searching for food when one will suddenly move quickly from the flock. A second bird accepts the implied invitation to follow and does so. A third and a fourth catch sight of the pursuit and soon the whole flock is running rapidly across the ground until it reaches a tree or a fence. Then the game commences. From ground to branches and back again; up and down the game goes on. Two, sometimes three birds will struggle for possession of a stick or piece of bark, walking on and rolling over each other. Some will spread wings and tail and strut about like turkeygobblers in action, some will squeak like young birds, until others rush up and feed them. Others, again, lie down like fowls indulging in a sand bath. Then quite suddenly the game of "Follow" is on again. Sometimes when these birds are regaling themselves on the bread-crusts placed for them, a couple of White-backed Magpies (*Gymnorhina* hypoleuca) will stalk proudly amongst them. Like offended grand dames the Choughs stand aside, fanning wings and spreading tails as if in a state of great displeasure.

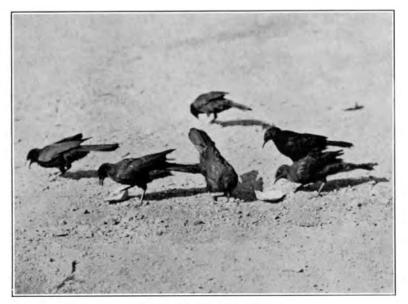
They are quite accustomed to the children and unconcernedly go on feeding while the latter are playing about. To-day, in order to see how close a small flock would approach us, some boys and I stood perfectly still and the birds fed to within seven feet of us before they changed direction.

Last year we built a "bird-table" and the Choughs, finding their food collected in the one spot, changed their habits somewhat. Though still frequently found on the ground when the children are at play, they very often arrive just as they march in to school, and at once make for the birdtable. This accommodates about seven birds at a time and every little while a bird will fly down from it and make room for another. Yesterday a bird hopped down and fed another that had been uttering the begging cry and immediately turned round and itself begged food from a third bird that had just left the table. In the afternoon of the same day four Crows visited the table while the Chough colony was in possession. THE EMU, Vol. XXIX.





Choughs on Bird-table.



White-winged Choughs. Photos. by H. A. C. Leach, R.A.O.U.

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From my observations in 1928 I had formed the opinion that the Choughs stood in awe of these bold birds, and I was greatly surprised to see them successfully withstand the efforts of the interlopers to get a feed for themselves. While four or five Choughs were feeding on the table the other members of the flock kept guard and every time a Crow flew from the fence or from the ground to alight on the table a Chough would fly up and turn it away. At last only one Chough was left feeding, and a Crow, moving with cautious side-steps, approached and perched on the table's rim. The Chough kept on feeding, apparently quite unconcerned, and, thus emboldened, the Crow made to step towards the food, but the Chough launched himself feet foremost at him and the intruder ignominiously fled.

Once, at lunch time, I heard a great commotion amongst the Choughs outside and moved to a window to see what was happening, but I was too late to learn the cause of the disturbance. The Choughs were perched in the trees, complaining loudly. I watched for some time and then saw one fly down and commence tapping the ground with its tail. A second joined the first and did likewise. Then a third and a fourth. This tapping was evidently an "all clear" signal, for the rest of the birds joined those on the ground and went on feeding. Portion of the food of Choughs consists of small black beetles and "white-ants" obtained from under the trees and stumps. To-day we noticed numbers of small holes, some about two inches deep, that had been made by the Choughs. On breaking away the ground still more we found small brown cocoons and several "white-ants." Close by we unearthed some beetles. During the past fortnight other Choughs have been seen tearing at the bagging placed around the trunks of fruit trees, presumably to get at the Codlin-moth grubs and "Jumping Jack" beetles harbouring there. In this district Choughs have been known to attack the young crops, and I know of one authentic case where a small flock was destroyed with poisoned oats. They enjoy apples placed for them on the bird-table, but I have no knowledge of their having touched the growing fruit.

All the flock helps in building the large mud nests, and there is almost a constant stream of birds flying up to the nest, each in turn hopping in and placing his "brick." Often two or three birds are seen perched on the limb waiting their turn. The nests are built in August and are left for some time to dry. One nest, just outside the school-ground, was occupied too soon, and it developed a "lean" and later fell off the branch. So strongly was the mud material cemented together that the only damage done was a small chip knocked off the side. In November of last year I saw a sitting bird shading some well-grown young ones by spreading her wings over the nest. Hoping to frighten the young ones out I threw up a stick. Instantly the mother uttered the wailing cry and immediately other similar notes arose in the timber, and about a dozen birds quickly appeared.

In 1927 and 1928 the Choughs, as a flock, deserted the school-ground about the middle of November, and did not return until about the end of the following March. On 12th April of this year thirty five birds were counted at the one time feeding on and around our bird table. This is placed about fifteen feet from two large windows, and the scholars and I have many "close-ups" of these interesting creatures.

At Barker's Creek School the whole life history of the Chough could be recorded by a cinema operator without any great difficulty.

Movements of Magpie-Larks (Grallina cyanoleuca).-On coming to Milingimbi, North Australia, I was surprised to observe the great numbers of Magpie-Larks (Gralling cyanoleuca) which are to be found here during the dry season (April to December). During that time they are here in hundreds, but I was interested to notice that with the approach of the wet season their numbers decrease until during January, February and March not one is to be seen, the birds having all departed southwards. This year (1929) the last lingerers were two birds observed on January 3, while the first arrivals after the "wet" were seen on April 8, and consisted of two males and one female. By the middle of the month Magpie-Larks were here in full strength again. Is there any record of the extent of their migration? What, I wonder, is their northern limit during the tropical rainy season? How far do they journey during the short three months of their absence from this coastal district?-T. THEODOR WEBB, R.A.O.U.

Sale of a Great Auk.—At a recent sale of the collection of the ornithological specimens of the late Mr. J. B. Nicholls, F.Z.S., conducted at Steven's auction rooms, a fine stuffed specimen of the Great Auk (*Alca impennes*) was purchased for the high sum of £660 by Mr. W. F. H. Rosenberg, the well-known naturalist, of 57 Haverstock Hill. The bird had originally been bought, together with an egg, by the late Robt. Champley in Mecklenberg about 1860. After the death of the owner the bird and egg were again offered at auction in 1902, when Mr. Nicholls bought the bird for £315, and the egg went to Mr. W. Stirling, of Fairburn, for £252.—D. DICKISON, R.A.O.U., Melb.

PLATE 25



White-winged Chough at nest. Photo. by D. Dickison. R.A.O.U.