

Field Notes on the White-browed Field-Wren (*Calamanthus albiloris*).

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(Read before the Bird Observers' Club, 17th. January, 1912.)

IN the open, heathy scrubs around Frankston, Victoria, the White-browed Field-Wren is fairly numerous. Wherever the dwarf sheoak (*Causarina distyla*) flourishes, one is almost certain to find this species. The sheoak bushes afford excellent hiding and a shade from the sun. *C. albiloris* is also partial to bayonet-grass country, and although it generally frequents damp, swampy ground, I have frequently observed specimens in summer on a dry, treeless hillside. However, during the winter months these slopes are wet and slippery through numerous small springs, which bubble and trickle through the soil. In April, 1909, several days were spent studying the habits of those shy little aviforms, and I have taken every opportunity since to verify and add to my observations. In one paddock about six pairs of birds were located, and their warbling songs could be heard from the bush-tops in all directions. The usual song may be described as a repetition of a series of sweet notes, mingled with a few notes that are slightly harsh. One call, used apparently during the breeding season, resembles the familiar "tang" note of the White-fronted Chat (*E. albigrons*). When mounting a bush-top to sing, the Wrens are extremely wary. The song is often begun in a low key, and repeated in this strain for some time. By actual count, one bird sang for twenty seconds. The effect is ventriloquial, the song seeming to come from hundreds of yards away. Having satisfied itself that no danger is at hand, the bird breaks into the full-throated song. As it sings the head is restlessly moved from side to side, the bird being ever on the watch for an enemy. At almost any time of the day one may hear the song of the Calamanthus, and in the dark I have heard one pouring forth its joyous notes. The bird allows one to approach to within about 30 yards, and then its song ceases. The tail is moved swiftly from side to side, the body swaying too, and suddenly the bird darts into the bush below. From my observations it would appear to be the male bird which sings so vehemently, the female being remarkably quiet. The female, lacking the white eyebrow and throat of her mate, would be readily distinguished when singing on a bush-top, and every example I have noticed was a male.

Owing to the protective colours of their plumage, the birds are not easily detected when hiding. The speed with which they run is amazing. In the curious crouching attitude which the Calamanthus assumes it resembles a mouse when running swiftly through the grass. It almost invariably alights on the ground after a flight. On the wing the tail is lowered to the plane of the body. For a second or two, when the bird settles, the tail is elevated over the back, and immediately lowered as the bird darts

to cover. If one is lucky, he may flush the bird, but generally several yards from where it alighted. Having seen a *Calamanthus* enter a small clump of dwarf sheoaks, I trampled the undergrowth under foot for several minutes, and failed to see a sign of it. Remaining quiet for a while, I was surprised presently to see the bird run—apparently from my feet—swiftly through the bushes. In the early morning, when the grass is wet with dew, it is exceedingly difficult to flush these birds. They seem to realize the disadvantage of wet plumage, and trust almost entirely to their powers of running and hiding to evade discovery. This habit being characteristic of the genus, it requires much patience to secure a specimen. If accompanied by a dog one's object is soon attained, but without that ally one may waste a considerable amount of time.

The White-browed Field-Wren is not a wanderer, but restricts itself to an area of ground fifty to a hundred yards square. At different periods I have visited localities mentioned above and noticed a bird singing on a favourite bush where one was observed months before. From an examination of several roosting-places it would appear that the birds perch at night about a foot above the ground in dwarf sheoaks (*Casuarina distyla*). Of course, this applies to country where stunted gum saplings are not growing. I have noticed nests only in August, September, and October, the one nest observed in August being found by Mr. F. E. Wilson, R.A.O.U. A nest found at Frankston with the aid of a setter dog, on the 17th October, 1911, contained two added eggs. During a heavy fall of rain the nest had been swamped, and was consequently deserted by the owners. Wet weather in swampy country causes a number of birds to desert their nests, and this possibly accounts for the extended breeding period.

Early in April, 1909, a bird was seen chasing another through the bushes, and several males on dissection disclosed the fact that the breeding season was at hand. A female which was obtained showed no signs of breeding. The staple diet of the *Calamanthus* is, possibly, insects. The stomach of one bird contained a number of a species of ant, and that of another grass seeds and small beetles. Snakes and blue-tongue lizards no doubt eat the eggs and young of this species. I have had two narrow escapes from being bitten by a snake when searching for the closely-hidden nest of the *Calamanthus*. My father, on one occasion, hearing some young birds squeaking in distress, hurried to the spot and caught a blue-tongue lizard in the act of devouring a nestling. On cutting the lizard, open a second bird was obtained. The young birds in the nest exhibit as much timidity as their parents. One chick, when I approached the nest, stood on its head, with its stumpy tail erected above its back. It squeaked with fear as I handled it, and, although scarcely able to run, made desperate efforts to escape through the grass. Foiled in its attempts, it again stood on its head, and remained in that position while I was in the vicinity.

The nests of *C. albiloris* examined were in most cases loosely



Nest (*in situ*) of Chestnut-backed Ground-Bird (*Cinclosoma castanonotum*).

FROM A PHOTO. BY F. L. WHITLOCK.

constructed of dried grasses, bits of bark, and a few skeleton gum-leaves. They were warmly lined with rabbit fur and feathers. The nest is dome-shaped, with the opening near the top. It is built usually on the ground under a tussock of grass, or in the heart of a dwarf casuarina. The description of a bird about one week old is as follows:—Abdomen creamy-buff; chest and flanks pale buff streaked with black; back dark olive-green, centred black; head quills blue, not yet broken; primaries and secondaries breaking, black, tipped with buff; tail half an inch long, breaking, buff at tips. Gape yellow; irides brown; legs light horn; bill dark horn.

Further Notes from the Stirling Ranges, W.A.

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IN the spring of 1910 I was collecting eggs and nests, on behalf of Mr. H. L. White, of Belltrees, New South Wales, in the Stirling Ranges, and an account of the trip appeared in *The Emu*.* I had to leave the locality before the season was really far advanced to search for certain rarer birds still believed to inhabit our south-coastal region. Naturally, my work was not complete in the Ranges, and a further trip was necessary to make it so.

The winter of 1911 proving very mild, with a rainfall considerably below the average, I arranged to leave home on 1st August, arriving at my hunting-grounds five days later. Birds were already nesting, and by the end of the month the young of certain species were on the wing. I was particularly anxious to obtain further information regarding the nesting habits of *Cinclosoma castanonotum*, *Hylacola cauta*, *Sericornis maculata*, *Falcunculus leucogaster*, *Malurus pulcherrimus*, and a few other species of lesser importance. How far I was successful the following notes will show. To the list of birds found in the Ranges I can add only one or two species which are not mentioned by other explorers or in my previous notes. They are:—*Petræca goodenovii* (Red-capped Robin), *Ægialitis cucullatus* (Hooded Dottrel), *Heteropygia acuminata* (Sharp-tailed Stint). The presence of the two former may have been due to the dry season in the interior of this State. In the previous season I had found several pairs of a *Hylacola* inhabiting stony hillsides covered with low scrub. I was too late to find the nest, as the young were already on the wing. In my previous paper I referred to this species as *Hylacola pyrrhopygia*. On referring a skin, however, to experts, I find that I was wrong, the bird being really *Hylacola cauta*. I determined to have a good hunt for the nest, which is described in A. J. Campbell's "Nests and Eggs" as always a difficult one to find—an opinion which I can now thoroughly endorse. I was not long in locating two pairs of birds, though the species is distinctly local, and rare, in the Stirling Ranges.

* *Emu*, vol. x., p. 305.