

## Days Among the "Corn-Birds."

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PREVIOUS to the month of November, 1925, I had not had any experience at first-hand of the Fantail-Warbler or Corn-Bird (*Cisticola exilis*); but about the middle of that month it was my good fortune to meet with a number of these birds, perhaps twenty pairs in all, which were nesting over about fifty acres on flats of the River Yarra, near Melbourne. These flats were the sites of numerous old billabongs, some of which were merely dry hollows containing growing grass, while others contained water. In these dry hollows there grew, about two feet high, a fine tussocky grass, which provided abundance of cover for the Corn-Birds and suited them admirably for nesting purposes.

My attention was first directed to these birds while crossing one of the hollows; I flushed several from the long grass. Retiring a distance of about thirty yards, and hiding myself in the grass, I watched one of the birds, whose actions suggested that it had a nest in the vicinity. After a few minutes the bird approached the spot where I had first seen it. It was carrying a piece of seed-down in its beak and, after perching for a few minutes on one of the tall seed-stalks of the dock-weed, to assure itself of the absence of danger, it suddenly dived into the grass and disappeared. I went over to the spot and disturbed it from a clump of grass. It flew a short distance and vanished again. I searched diligently and eventually the nest was discovered almost in the centre of a large tussock. It was placed about a foot from the ground and was so well hidden that a person could have passed within two feet without being aware of its presence.

The nest was suspended among the upright stems of the grass and was a domed structure, with the entrance at the side, facing east. It consisted of fine pieces of grass, principally small seed-stalks, intermixed with seed-down, much of which still had the seeds attached to it. The lining consisted entirely of seed-down and a woolly substance, the identity of which I was unable to ascertain. Growing stems of grass were twined round the outside of the nest, and the whole structure was very compact and harmonised well with its surroundings.

The nest contained three eggs, of a beautiful sky-blue colour, spotted with reddish-brown. The usual clutch of eggs may be either three or four, as three nests found later each contained four eggs, while the rest each contained but three.

I subsequently found six other nests of the species. They were similar to the first nest in manner of construction, and all faced east except one, which faced north. The position of two nests, however, differed from the others, inasmuch as they were placed within two inches of the ground and without the protection of any tussock. Their protection lay in the fact that the bird had cleverly sewn the



" CORN-BIRD " (FEMALE) AT NEST.

Photo. by T. V. Givens.

broad green leaves of a common weed around the nest, so that little was visible except the entrance. I do not think that the reason for this was a shortage of nesting sites, as one of the nests was built on the edge of a hollow which was similar to other hollows in which the birds had built their nests. My belief, although I may be in error, is that all of these birds originally built nests of this type and have only comparatively recently adopted the habit of nesting in tussocks.

The male bird did not take part in the incubation of the eggs or the feeding of the young, but contented himself with singing near the nest, either on a twig a few yards away or whilst flying. Occasionally, the presence of a nest could be detected by the excited scolding of a male bird. The female was quiet; she seldom called when near the nest. It was not hard to distinguish between the male and female birds, as the bright golden head of the male was very conspicuous.

The notes of the birds consisted almost solely of two kinds, though when scolding, the male bird seemed to use a large variety of notes. Generally, however, only the two notes were used. They were a rasping sound and two or three whistling notes, the latter nearly always following the former. The male bird especially made a habit of doing this, generally while flying apparently aimlessly. Sometimes when I approached a hollow all would be silent, with not a bird to be seen, but in a few minutes first one and then another would rise from the grass to a fair height and commence singing, the song being sustained for several minutes. The calls of the male and female birds are similar, except that the rasping sound made by the male is much harsher than that made by the female. The young birds also made a rasping sound when being fed, though it had not the volume of the call of the adult bird—it was like nothing so much as the sound made by a snake when gliding through grass.

The resemblance of the Corn-Birds, when flying, to large butterflies was especially marked as they fluttered over the grass. When ascending, however, the flight was more irregular. The birds usually flew in the "butterfly" manner, but they were capable of a swift and sustained flight. An instance of this was given when a nest was discovered in an isolated clump of grass not more than a few yards across. Surrounding it completely there grew a very short grass, only a few inches in height, since it was continually being eaten by cattle, which did not touch the long, tussocky grass. The female bird, in order to obtain sufficient nesting material, had to fly over this grass a distance of fifty or sixty yards to the nearest patch of long grass. This flight was not made high, but only a few feet above the ground, and the bird flew straight and fast each time she made the journey.

Very often the birds would not rise from the grass until I was within a few feet of them, so that when searching for a nest it was not safe to assume that the bird had risen from a nest when it did this. It was not hard to distinguish between occasions when the bird had gone to the nest and when it had only disappeared into the grass, because the bird always was very cautious about going to the nest

and did not merely dive into the grass, as it did when not going to the nest.

The food of the Corn-Birds consisted for the most part, I think, of insects, which were obtained principally from the ground. There seemed to be an abundance of insects in the grass, and the birds obtained them by running along the ground, at the same time searching every nook and corner of the grass.

On the first day that I attempted to obtain a photograph of the Corn-Birds they were shy and would not come near the camera. It had therefore to be placed about ten feet away, and moved up at intervals, in order to allow the birds to become used to it. This occupied about half a day, and it was the day following the discovery of the nest before the birds were sufficiently accustomed to the sight of the camera to permit a photograph to be taken.

Early that day I arrived at the nest, equipped with all necessary photographic material. When the camera was placed in the position in which it had last been on the previous day the birds showed no hesitation in visiting the nest; but when the camera was placed almost opposite the entrance of the nest, they were doubtful about visiting the cradle. Very soon, though, they overcame this distrust, probably on account of the fact that one of the eggs had hatched during the night. The light on this day was very poor, particularly in the morning when most of the photographs were taken; the afternoon was unsuitable because the light was then behind the nest.

When approaching its home the Corn-Bird would take short flights until within five yards of the nest; then it would drop to the ground and creep through the grass until it reached the nest. It always approached from behind, forcing its way through the tussock in which the nest was built. It was necessary to keep one's eyes continually on the nest, as it was impossible to see the bird as it approached.

There was no difficulty in taking the first few photographs of the Corn-Bird. It was soon tame enough to visit the nest, and the fact that it would hesitate a little enabled the photographer to expose a plate before it entered the nest. But when the bird became more accustomed to the camera there was difficulty in taking a photograph while the bird was in the correct position, as it generally entered the nest with little or no pause at the front.

It was the week following before I was again able to visit the nest. The young birds were then about half grown, and even at this time I did not observe the male bird feed them. Possibly he also shared in the feeding of the young, though too wary to do so when I was present. The young birds, after they left the nest, became adept at hiding in the grass, and it was an extremely difficult matter to locate them once they were hidden.