

Whisper-Songs

By JAMES POLLARD, R.A.O.U., Kalamunda, W.A.

Hearing a Grey Butcher-Bird (*Cracticus torquatus*) whistling in a strangely still small voice in January last, my memory took me back a twelve-month to the day when first I heard this bird whistling in the same manner. On that day, early in February, 1929, I stood watching a "psalmist," the Western Warbler (*Gerygone fusca*), which for once had forsaken the higher forest tops and come down to the limbs of a she-oak (*Casuarina*), where, whilst listening to his plaintive chant, I could watch him prying about. Silvereyes (*Zosterops*) and "Tomtits" (*Acanthiza*) were busy in neighbouring trees, and a poet might have fancied that the Warbler's refrain was a soft accompaniment to their lively airs. And as I watched, up into the fronds of the she-oak winged a Butcher-bird, rising quietly and swiftly. Noiseless and swift as he was, however, the *Gerygone* eluded him, and presently I heard its brave notes from a higher top farther away. Meanwhile, the Butcher-bird had gone on to another tree and was looking in all directions for whatever he could see to interest him. A note written at the time reads:—"It was a jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) that the Butcher-bird had entered, and he perched on a lower limb. I now heard many low warblings and whistlings as though coming from the higher parts of that tree. The Butcher-bird was looking up into the tops, and so did I look, hoping to see the author or authors of those small but beautiful notes. But never a tiny warbler could I find. I heard my *Gerygone* singing in another tree. He had come nearer, and there was an anxious and an inquiring note in his voice. I looked again at the Butcher-bird. Queer, I thought, the way he looks up among the limbs. I fancied I saw his beak opening. I studied him keenly. Then I made the discovery that he was the author of those tiny and beautiful warblings and whistlings. . . . That Butcher-bird was practising an ancient guile. He was whistling and warbling like the Silvereyes and Thornbills, and throwing in one or two notes like those of the *Gerygone*, in the hope that he would be drawing the smaller fry inquisitively near him."

In *The Emu*, Vol. XXIX., p. 90, Mr. H. Stuart Dove describes how he heard the Butcher-bird practising the same whisper-song, but does not suggest any motive for the

altered tone of the bird. He does, however, remark the ventriloquial quality of the warblings, which I, too, noticed, as the sounds appeared to come from higher than the limb on which my bird was stationed. But would it not be obvious enough that mimicry on the part of a bird with an ill-reputation as a bird-killer would be mimicry with ill-intent? Perhaps the question is debatable, but the two observations are indicative. The whisper-song is at least a definite habit. Also it extends to other birds.

Mr. Dove has heard the White-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*) "indulge in the same sort of ditty," and corroborates a New Zealand observer's note that the Silver-eye (*Zosterops halmaturina*) also practises a whisper-song. With regard to the Western Silvereye (*Z. australasica*), my studies would not lead me to believe that any of its smallest and softest notes are abnormal to its habitual singing, which is extremely varied both in tone and volume. But I can confirm that magpies have a rare habit of whispering a song.

On January 30, 1929, I watched two or three Western Magpies (*Gymnorhina dorsalis*) making sallies at a pair of Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrikes (*Coracina novæ-hollandiæ*), and a note from my diary of that date runs:—Once I heard the "Bluebirds" purring and crying more poignantly than usual, but missed the "scrap," if there was one, thanks to an intervening bush. The Magpie, however, flew into sight and commenced caroling. The "Bluebirds" were purring at the same time. Listening, I was puzzled by the "Bluebird" calls appearing to come from the Magpie. The carol softened and drifted into a series of weak squeaking notes, some of them like the "Bluebirds'" notes. Then the Magpie flew across and perched on the verandah pagoda, from where, almost within touch, it peered down at me through the cross-bars in an astonished and lively, inquisitive way, all the time running over the various small squeaky notes I had heard whilst it was perched in the bush. . . . While I have known Magpies mimic all sorts of things, from a wailing child to a screeching steam-roller, I do not recall having heard one use so small a voice as this one did. Many of the smaller notes were sweetly musical, like the warbling of "Tits." The incident recalled the Butcher-bird which I had heard sing softly a little while previously.

I have not since heard the Magpie at this game, and so I imagine it is very rarely practised. But evidently whisper-songs are not accidental.