

## Notes on The Rainbow-Bird

By Mrs. E. COMRIE-SMITH, R.A.O.U., Qld.

The following description of the nesting habits of the Rainbow-bird (*Merops ornatus*) is based on notes taken from my note-book for last year—1929.

When crossing the grass paddock at 8 a.m. on the morning of October 15, 1929, I saw a pair of Rainbow-birds flying about close to the ground evidently prospecting for a nesting-hole. They flew round quartering the ground and every now and then one would alight and look about and peck at a particular spot, then the other would come and stand close beside it shoulder to shoulder. After a minute or so off they flew and examined another spot, keeping up their pleasing trilling song all the time. I watched them at their house-hunting for about half an hour, but when I came back in an hour's time they seemed to have settled the question. They were close together at the upper edge of a slight depression in the level ground which made a miniature bank, and they had begun to scratch out the hole. The ground is very hard, and the grass-roots very tough, and they took it in turn one to excavate and one to mount guard. The worker would jab his long bill in three or four times and shake his head vigorously to get the sand out of his mouth, then down went his head and up went his long tail, and his little feet scratched like lightning for a second or two.\*

I left them then, and came back at sunset and as both birds were away I had a good look at the excavation: it was  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches long, and the ground, though sandy, was so hard that to my finger it felt like cement. What strength and perseverance! And they have at least 30 inches further to go, and then a chamber to scoop out large enough for them to turn round without spoiling their beautiful tails.

I was not able to visit the nest for a week and then I saw one of the birds come out of the nesting-hole, at the opening of which there was by then a quantity of sand spread over the grass. Both birds perched on a dead pear-branch near and would not go to the nest while I watched, so I saw nothing further for another week, when I saw one of the birds feeding the other, so knew the female was sitting. On November 18 being again near the nest, but not seeing the birds and hearing nothing with my ear to the hole, I thought that the young must be hatched and flown, having no idea how long the incubation and fledging would take. So I opened up the hole to see how it was

\* Mr. A. D. Selby, R.A.O.U., who supplied the accompanying photograph, says that he has observed the Rainbow-Bird use a small piece of wood, held in the beak, to assist in excavating.—Ed.



Rainbow-Bird (Female) at nesting tunnel.

Photo. by A. D. Selby, R.A.O.U.

made. I did it carefully with my hands and found the passage went in for 52 inches, ending in a large chamber the span of my hand across, and to my surprise I felt warm eggs in it!

I took them out—four beautiful little pure white spheres, then hastily replaced them, carefully roofed the passage with a piece of paling covered with sods and earth and then grass, and devoutly hoped the mother wouldn't notice the difference. I hid carefully and after watching for a considerable time observed both birds come back and fly around, looking at the hole and evidently not quite liking it. After careful examination, however, one of them went in and stayed there, greatly to my satisfaction.

Two days later I found that cows had trodden on my makeshift roof and caved it in. I opened it up and found the bird imprisoned in the nest chamber. I took it out and had a good look at it, then let it go and again repaired the damage. I watched the birds on the pear-tree for a long time and finally saw one of them again go into the hole and stay there—they are evidently not easily discouraged. Several times during the next ten days I watched and listened at the nest, and on December 1, 1930, I heard the faint sound of young birds. Five days later I took the board off the passage and putting my hand into the nest chamber felt the warm young birds. I took one out to observe—it had its eyes closed, was fat and pink and fleshy and had no feathers. The parents were most perturbed and flew round me chirping till I put it back and went away.

On December 11 the nest was again found to be caved in by cattle. Once again I cleared out the passage and took out one of the young. It was now covered with stiffish grey feathers and just beginning to show a blue colour on the back, the eyes were still closed, and it was very fat. There were the remains of bright iridescent green insects in the nest. On December 14 I again took out one of the young birds and found it much bigger and the feathers more "feathery," and all coloured as in the adult bird. This time the eyes were open. A week later I took out a young bird and found it to be fully fledged and very fierce. It pecked at me and held my finger with its long sharp bill. There were four young birds; as they were hatched on, or just before, December 1, they seem to take a long time to arrive at that stage where they are sufficiently grown to leave the nest.

On December 23 three of the young birds had flown, the fourth still had some of its wing feathers not quite grown. One of the parent birds always stood sentinel on a dead branch of the pear tree, and as soon as I came in sight began its warning note—a gentle purring whistle. For the

last week prior to this date there were three adults feeding the youngsters in the nest. Was this third one the first to be fledged of the young brood?

After three more days the fourth young one was still there. Its wing feathers had still a little of quill showing at the base. Later in the day I found it flown and the whole family gone.

#### **A Record of the Purple-crowned Pigeon for Victoria.—**

On May 4, 1930, a seven years old boy named Robert A. Johnston caught a small Pigeon among some blue gum trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*) growing around his home at Raglan, near Beaufort, Victoria. No other Pigeons were with it, and it did not attempt to fly away. It seemed to be exhausted, and it was put into a cage, and seed and water were placed in the cage. It did not eat any of the seed, but after having had a drink it brightened up and hopped about the cage. It was timid, however, and appeared to tremble when anybody approached the cage. About twenty-four hours after it was captured it died, and was then sent to the Chief Inspector of Fisheries and Game for identification, but as the members of his staff were not sure of its identity it was sent on to me. It proved to be an immature female Purple-crowned Pigeon (*Ptilinopus superbus*), and this appears to be the first record of that species being found in Victoria. The usual range is the Papuan and Moluccan Islands and the densely timbered and scrub covered coastal areas and mountain chains of eastern Queensland, but a few specimens have been obtained in New South Wales near Sydney. There is one record for Tasmania, a specimen having been obtained there fifty-eight years ago. Not only was the bird which was found at Raglan far south of its usual haunts, but was also far west of the heavily timbered and thickly scrubbed localities. When skinning the bird I ascertained that it had had no food for a considerable time. The specimen is now in the Union's collection.—J. A. ROSS, R.A.O.U., Melbourne.

**Back to Penguin.**—People travelling on the main coast road between Ulverstone and Penguin on the night of December 18, 1929, were surprised to see quite a number of Little Penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) by the roadside. Fifty years ago the birds used to breed in numbers in the vicinity of the Penguin Creek, from which the township was named, but in the course of settlement they have become scarce; it was, therefore, somewhat surprising to witness members of the returning tribe by a dusty and stony wayside, hedged with weeds and disturbed by glaring headlights and nerve-racking motor-horns.—H. STUART DOVE, R.A.O.U., Tas.