

## A Singer of the Heath Country

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Many of the uplands of the sandstone ridges surrounding Sydney are clothed with a type of low scrubby vegetation known as heath. To the casual observer these areas do not appear particularly inviting. However, a close inspection reveals a wealth of plant life and a great variety of flowers. Many of these flowers, heavily honey-laden, attract numbers of honey-loving birds. Insects, too, attracted by the flowers, form the food of various insectivorous birds. Many of these birds are wholly confined to the heath country. Particularly so in this respect is the Chestnut-tailed Ground Wren or Heath Wren (*Hylacola pyrrhopygia*). It is by no means plentiful, and this, coupled with its timidity, renders it little known. The rather plain colouring of the bird also makes it inconspicuous. The general colour is brown, the upper tail coverts rich chestnut, the tail light tipped, and eyebrows whitish. The breast is whitish, lightly streaked with darker markings. The sexes differ only in the slightly larger size of the male. The tail is ordinarily carried erect after the manner of the Blue Wren but not quite at such a rakish angle.

The first indication usually of the presence of the Heath Wren is revealed by its song, which is an outstanding performance. Mounting to the top of a bush, it pours forth a medley of trills and warbles that delight the ear. Intermingled with its own notes are the songs of other birds. In the faithfulness of its mimicry it is but little inferior to that master mocker, the Lyrebird. There is perhaps an added sweetness bestowed on some of the borrowed songs. The Lyrebird usually makes a slight pause between its various mimetic notes, but the Heath Wren mingles the notes of other birds with its own song in one sustained melody. The songs of many of the other bird inhabitants such as the Cuckoos, Honeyeaters, Rufous Whistler, Brown Warbler, Diamond Bird (*Pardalotus*) and others are faithfully reproduced. During the late winter and early spring, when nesting has commenced, is the best time to hear the delightful song of this dweller of the heathy uplands.

Few birds are more difficult to follow to their nest than the Heath Wren. Keeping to the thick undergrowth, it hops with agility from branch to branch, or creeps mouse-like along the ground with tail depressed, often covering a considerable distance without giving any sign of its progress. With tail erect it negotiates an open space at a surprising speed, appearing to bounce over the surface, so rapid are the succession of hops. Time after time the bird will elude the observer. In contrast to the extreme timidity shown a few twitters and squeaks will sometimes entice the bird to one's very feet.



"Heath-Wren" at Nest.

Photo by Norman Chaffer, R.A.O.U.



Chestnut-tailed Ground-Wren.

Photo by Norman Chaffer, R.A.O.U.

On August 18, 1929, a Heath Wren was observed carrying nesting material, and two hours' searching and watching was required before the nest was located—and it was only twenty feet from where I first observed the bird. This nest was later on destroyed when it contained the setting of three eggs. The eggs were whitish in colour, gradually merging into chocolate brown at the larger end. On August 12 of this year (1930) another bird was noted with food, and over an hour of hide and seek was spent before the elusive birds revealed to me the position of their nest. It was prettily situated at the foot of a dwarf apple (*Angophora*) among the grasses within a few inches of the ground. A couple of sprays of pink *boronia* formed a pretty decoration alongside, and nearby many heath flowers such as *epacris* and *grevillea* displayed their blooms. The nest was roughly spherical in form, though somewhat wedge-shaped at the bottom, where it fitted among the grasses. The front was drawn out a little to form the entrance. Rather loosely constructed it was made of bark, dead and decaying leaves, fibres and grasses, matted together apparently without the use of spider's web. The nesting chamber was warmly lined with feathers. The approximate external dimensions were entrance to rear  $5\frac{1}{2}$  in., depth  $4\frac{1}{2}$  in., width  $4\frac{1}{2}$  in., entrance  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in. diameter. The nest was occupied by three large young almost ready to venture forth into the world. They already had much the same plumage as the adults.

I set up my camera a few feet from the nest. The parents became very excited, now scolding me from the shelter of the bushes, now "bouncing" swiftly over an open rocky space within a few feet of me. After a time the female became quite trustful, and took but little notice of the camera or me. She even perched on my leg on several occasions when approaching the nest. Sometimes I made a sudden movement with my foot to make her pause momentarily when she was near the nest. She would almost invariably hop over to investigate, and having satisfied herself that all was well, would return to the nest. The approach to the nest was very cautious. Over the last few feet she would creep up silently until the nest was reached. The young were fed largely on spiders. The food was secured from the shrubs or under the fallen leaves. The male bird remained in the vicinity all the time but could not be induced to pay the nest a visit. Occasionally he would mount to the top of a shrub and entertain me with his delightful song. The favourite among the several borrowed songs was the various notes of the Spinebill Honeyeater. Once or twice the female gave an answering warble, but she was mostly too busy with domestic duties. Altogether I spent a very enjoyable morning in very pleasant surroundings fraternising with the Heath Wrens. The air was delightfully fresh and sunny and all around the heath flowers were a riot of colour and perfume.