

Some Notes on the Black-faced Wood-Swallow

By A. C. CAMERON, R.A.O.U., Biddeston, Qld.

One of the best-known characteristics of the Wood-Swallow family, fourteen members of which are wholly Australasian, is a propensity for roving. The White-browed and Masked, in particular, are noted wanderers, although they may return to the same locality each year for nesting purposes. A very marked contrast, in most other ways as well as this, is provided by another member of the family, the Black-faced bird (*Artamus melanops*). It is no exaggeration to say that it is one of the most local of birds. Of a great many pairs which I have had under observation at various times, the majority of them seem to live, breed and die within a quarter of a mile, or less, of one particular spot. During the nesting months, which extend from August to January, the birds are always within 100 yards of the nest, while in the autumn and winter they usually wander no further than the nearest fence or telephone wire.

If a cultivated field is available, it is a popular feeding ground. A great many moths and other small insects are caught on the wing, after the manner in which Swallows catch their food. Those tactics are often varied by hovering and diving feats, which one usually associates with Hawks, and with the Kestrel in particular.

At the non-breeding period of the year the little grey birds become extremely fearless and confiding. With no family cares to worry them, they show a complete absence of fear of man; in fact, they appear to show a preference for human society. But, as the spring approaches, each pair selects its own domain. Intruders as large as Cuckoo-Shrikes, Kestrels and Butcher-birds are easily routed by the plucky little birds. In their increased pugnacity as the nesting season advances they resemble their near relatives, but in their lack of sociability they differ markedly. Other Wood-Swallows nest freely in adjacent trees. One tree sometimes contains several nests, the owners of all of them uniting to repel invaders.

In the actual building, too, the little Black-faced birds are unique. The flimsy, careless nests of other Wood-Swallows, occupying a few days in building, are beneath their dignity altogether. From four to seven weeks is the usual time occupied by them, but the building sometimes drags on for as much as two months. The finished nest is a comparatively substantial structure, and is always built in a hollow of a dead tree. Usually it is placed just inside the end of a hollow spout, and the head and tail of the sitting bird are often visible from below. One nest, however, which

came under my notice recently was fully five inches below the entrance. In this case the entrance was a hole in the side of a vertical branch. The sitting bird, too, was very difficult to flush, and but for the fact that a twig had protruded through a crack in the branch, the nest would have escaped observation altogether. The nest is composed of fine twigs or rootlets and coarse grass stems, and is invariably lined with a few long black hairs. It is much deeper than that of, say, the White-browed Wood-Swallow. One pair of birds which had made use of a nest of the latter species had deepened it considerably, and lined it with the usual black horsehair.

The eggs differ somewhat from those of the other Wood-Swallows, but resemble them in the variation of size, shape and markings. On this account they are much sought after by collectors. Apparently the type of egg is determined by seasonal conditions more than by anything else.* For example, I found several nests containing eggs last spring (1931). All the eggs were fairly constant in type, the ground colour being pale cream, the spots evenly distributed and of a light, rust-red colour, while the usual grey under-markings were almost absent. This spring (1932), however, the same birds† have been observed and their eggs inspected. In some cases the hollows used last year were again occupied. All the eggs were pearly white in colour, with a distinct zone of dark sepia spots round the largest part, while the purplish-grey markings were quite prominent. The 1931 eggs were short and rounded, resembling those of a Pardalote in shape; the 1932 eggs were almost as much elongated as those of a Babbler (*Pomatostomus*).

There are other peculiarities about the eggs as well as these. The first clutch laid each season by any bird usually contains three eggs. The second, laid under normal conditions during the first week in December, almost invariably contains four. Moreover, if the nest be inspected before the last egg has been laid, that egg will usually differ greatly from the others as regards markings.

Sometimes during the nesting season as many as a dozen birds may be seen huddled together on a branch as closely as possible. Their dignity and passion for solitude forgotten for the time being, they will remain like this for hours. Once only I observed them clinging like a swarm of bees to a blackened tree trunk, but as this was in the depth of winter the attitude was probably prompted by a desire for warmth.

*This statement is interesting as it is not in accord with some observations on this matter, which suggest that often birds lay the same type of egg throughout their lives.—Ed.

†See previous footnote. Even taking into consideration the author's remarks as to the birds being very local, yet were these necessarily the same birds?—Ed.