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Nesting of the Weebill, and Notes on Classification based on Nest Architecture

By Dr. SPENCER ROBERTS, Toowoomba, Queensland

In *The Emu* (Vol. xxii, pt. 4, April, 1923) Hubert Jarvis and I made a statement that the Brown Weebill (*Smicror-nis brevirostris*) had a peculiar and individual way of building its nest. We stated that it built a cup nest first and then added a dome. That was, I believe, the first recorded observation of a fact which has since been confirmed and denied many times over by various writers. But as a bald statement it is without significance, unless considered in conjunction with the other subject matter of our article which dealt with "The Small Brown Birds of the Granite Belt" (of south Queensland). The real point is that although we studied *S. brevirostris*, four species of Thornbills (*Acanthiza*) two of Warblers (*Gerygone*) and the Speckled Warbler (*Chthonicola sagittata*), all of which build domed nests, the Weebill is the only bird which presents this feature, viz., that the dome can be seen to be supported—an essential in its architecture—by what was the rim of the original cup of the nest. To those who deny this I would point out that the nests of many cup-building species have a most uneven rim, some points of which are much higher than others, and I will instance the Noisy Friar-bird and the Striped Honeyeater. If a dome were added to such nests, the higher points of suspension would seem to be part of the dome and the lower of the body of the nest, and this is what occurs on many occasions in the case of the Weebill.

Further, each Thornbill dealt with—and we considered *A. lineata*, *A. reguloides*, *A. pusilla* and *A. chrysorrhoa*—was shown to have its own very definite way of building its nest and supporting it.

Perhaps no other group of birds in Australia has been more discussed and written about by those who delight in

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identifying species and sub-species, than the Thornbills. The genus includes quite a large proportion of the really small birds seen by the field worker in wooded country south of the 17th parallel, and the divergence of opinion amongst thoroughly competent authorities is astounding. These opinions have been based almost exclusively on the data revealed by dried skins, and I will quote two sets of opinions concerning two of the birds included in our article, namely *A. reguloides* and *A. pusilla*.

1. *A. reguloides*.—When our article appeared, a very eminent Australian authority wrote to me stating that a mistake had surely been made and that *reguloides* should have been *squamata*. A search of literature available to me gave the the following results. The R.A.O.U. "Checklist" recognized:

485 *Acanthiza (Geobasileus) squamata*.—Varied Thornbill. It gives as its original reference *A. squamata* De Vis, . . . N.Q., Herberton.

Mathews refuses to recognize *A. squamata* as a species and makes it a sub-species of *A. chrysorrhoea*. *A. chrysorrhoea* is the Yellow-tailed Thornbill, which builds the unique double-decker nest. Surely, therefore, a consideration of the nesting habits would throw some light on the problem of whether or not *A. squamata* is the same bird as *A. chrysorrhoea*. There is a further complication—the "Checklist" gives us a second reference under *A. squamata*:

G. reguloides nesa Mathews, S.E.Q. . . . Bunya Mts.

Surely there was my bird of the area dealt with, a bird that had originally been made a sub-species of the Buff-tailed Thornbill (*A. reguloides*). Mathews illustrates it on plate 452 (top left hand figure). So I was more confused, although subsequent examination of the type skins of *A. squamata*, with the description of its nest, and of the birds here and their nests, made me lean to the opinion that *A. squamata* is a northern form of *A. reguloides* and that our bird of the Granite belt was certainly *A. reguloides*.

2. *A. pusilla*.—The "Checklist" includes, amongst other species of *Acanthiza*, the following: Tasmanian Thornbill (*A. ewingi*), Mountain Thornbill (*A. katherina*), Brown Thornbill (*A. pusilla*), Broad-tailed Thornbill (*A. apicalis*), Whitlock Thornbill (*A. whitlocki*), Red-tailed Thornbill (*A. hamiltoni*), Inland Thornbill (*A. albiventris*). Mathews says they are all *pusilla*. It is obvious therefore, that at least they must be somewhat alike, and to my mind it is equally obvious that the mere examination of dried skins will never settle the matter and is unsatisfactory as the sole basis for separating specimens which are so much alike. Written descriptions of the nests should help in view of the fact that those built by most undisputed species of *Acanthiza* differ individually. But the descriptions available are so lacking in detail that no one could visualize the nests from them.

I would suggest, therefore, that, before the next revision of the "Checklist" is undertaken, some further data on this matter of nesting be collected. It is remarkably interesting work and should appeal to the field worker. If any race of birds like *A. pusilla* differs essentially in its nest structure from the typical *pusilla*, then that might be a ground for separating it.

Nest architecture seems to be a trait which persists, a fact that is apparent when one remembers how Pardalotes build a domed nest at the end of a burrow. Undoubtedly, the typical *pusilla* has in its repertoire of notes one series which identifies it immediately, and although I am quite aware that such cannot be taken as a point of identification by the cabinet worker, yet to the field worker it is a very distinct indication.

My apologies are offered for bringing before members so much which may seem trivial, but it is a dislike to such trivialities which has influenced me to write this note, and I would enter a plea for the broadest views by those interested in classification. In my opinion, unless there is a very valid reason for it, specimens which are very much alike should not be separated into numerous species simply on account of some slight climatic variation of colour alone. Nothing alienates the interest of many birdmen more than such a process and it is neither scientific on the one hand nor helpful on the other.

Mrs. Perrine Moncrieff submitted several illustrations to accompany her contribution "Two Trips into the Hinterland of Nelson Province, New Zealand," (*The Emu*, Vol. xxxv, pp. 137-144), but suitable prints were not available until after publication. Two of the illustrations appear opposite this reference.