

Notes on the Dusky Moorhen

By E. A. R. LORD, Murphy's Creek, Queensland

The Dusky Moorhen (*Gallinula tenebrosa*), the only one of the Gallinules yet recorded in the Murphy's Creek district, appears to be decidedly on the increase here. The principal reason for the increased numbers is no doubt the fact that property owners are taking a more lively interest in the birds and protecting them from the shooters who at one time wandered at will along the creeks shooting anything that came within range of their guns.

I have derived much pleasure through the past few years in studying the nesting and general habits of these birds and have learned a good deal about their methods of nest-building and the habits and colour-changes of the young birds. I have observed that there are two types of structures built by Moorhens—one for breeding purposes and the other a play or resting place. Much time is spent by the birds preening their feathers on the latter type of structure. Mating often occurs there.

The construction of a play platform is very similar to the breeding nest but its situation is quite different. It is usually placed on weeds or mud in shallow water or on stones in a stream between water holes and always in an exposed position.

The breeding nest, a rather bulky affair, made of sticks, dried weed stems, pieces of bark, grass and water-weed, is usually built on a branch, frequently of a tea-tree which stretches out over deep water. Some nests are placed as high as 6 feet above the water but more often they have a clearance of from 8 inches to 1 foot. During the last nesting season (1935-36) I had two nests under constant observation.

The first was found on November 24, 1935, and was ready for eggs. Four days later an egg was laid, then nine days passed before laying was continued. The second egg was seen in the nest on December 7. From that date the bird laid daily until the full clutch of seven eggs was completed on December 12.

A bird was seen brooding from the time that the second egg was laid. On December 14 a fierce-looking storm was gathering at the head of the creek with every chance of a flood which would have destroyed the nest and eggs so I collected the set for a friend. The storm, however, passed round with no rain of importance on our watershed.

The birds remained in the vicinity of the nest and an inspection on January 27, 1936, showed that the nest was again in use and contained three eggs. Two more eggs, which completed the clutch, were laid on January 28 and 29, and a bird was observed brooding. On January 31, I

found a large carpet snake in the branches three feet above the nest, and the bird brooding beneath it. I was relieved to find the eggs had not been interfered with. A prod with a stick made the snake fall to the water, narrowly missing the eggs in its fall. It disappeared under water and was seen no more.

The first egg hatched on February 19, twenty-one days after the last egg had been laid. The little bird, although only just dry, took to the water when I was ten feet from the nest and swam strongly to a tea-tree bough which dipped into the water six feet away, scrambled up to the cover of the leaves and remained hidden. Two more eggs hatched on February 20 and the fourth on the following day. The young birds left the nest for the water as the first bird had done and also swam to and hid in the tea-tree branch.

After the fourth egg had hatched the parents took the brood from the nest and they spent their time swimming about in search of food. The fifth egg was added.

On February 24 I worked the birds to the end of the waterhole where it was clear of cover. The parents left the water and ran back up the hole to hide, but the young birds "planted" in the mud at the water's edge and remained motionless with heads and bodies flattened to the ground in a similar manner to that of young Plovers. I handled each bird in turn. They were thickly covered with fluffy black down. The lower half of the bill was yellow, the upper half red. The crown and line down the front to the bill was red and the skin on the wing tips yellow.

It is peculiar that, though the young birds resemble the parents in their colouring when hatched, they undergo such a complete change in colouring at about one month old when they become fully feathered. Their plumage then is brown with light grey streaks along the cheeks, and they show no red or yellow colouring about the head or bill. This colouring remains until the birds attain their mature plumage the following summer.

The second nest was found on February 2, 1936, with a complete set of seven eggs and a bird brooding. From the condition of the nest, which, like the other one dealt with, was placed on a tea-tree bough reaching out over deep water—this second one had a clearance of nine inches—it was evident that it had been used for an earlier brood. That proved to be the case as I later found several half-grown birds in the company of the nesting pair.

The first egg was hatched on February 26, twenty-four days after the bird was found brooding on the full set. Three more hatched on February 27 and two on the following day. The seventh egg had been broken by some boys on February 17. Fortunately they had sense enough to leave the other eggs in the nest when they found that the broken egg contained a chick.