

The Fantail-Warbler at Home

By C. E. BRYANT, Melbourne, Victoria

Early this year I spent some delightful hours with the Fantail-Warbler (*Cisticola exilis*) at Bulleen, along the Yarra, about seven miles from Melbourne. Usually the species is shy and suspicious of watchers near its nest, but the hen of this pair was the tamest wild bird I have encountered, not excepting sundry Yellow Robins and Grey Fantails of my experience that had hitherto appeared the most confiding and trusting of birds. There is an account of photographing *Cisticola*, by T. E. Givens, in *The Emu*, volume XXVI, page 56, the locality being, probably, within a hundred yards of where my bird nested, but his subject was camera-shy and Givens had to move his camera nearer at intervals in order to break down the bird's apprehension.

Along the Yarra at the place in question are low-lying flats, subject to flooding and intersected by lagoons constituted by cut-off meanders of the river. The flats are grown chiefly with tussock grass (*Poa caespitosa*), which is used freely by the birds as nesting sites. Above this the birds may be seen indulging their curious flight, giving their buzzing call, terminating with the sharp whistle which is so characteristic, as they fly. Docks (*Rumex*) are interspersed through the tussocks and are used by the species as nesting sites, but not to such a degree as is the tussock grass.

On Saturday, January 8, 1938, I found a nest with four eggs, built in a tussock, about nine inches from the ground. The nest appeared as if just completed, being trim and fresh-looking, but actually the eggs were about two-thirds incubated, evidenced by the fact that, on the following Wednesday morning, there were two young birds in the nest—and two eggs. A friend and I set up cameras about three feet from the nest and after perhaps ten minutes the hen returned. We each took two or three photos, but the images were too small for clarity—and in any case the sun was nearly behind the nest.

On January 12, I visited the nest at 6 a.m., but had to wait until 7.15 a.m. before the sun was sufficiently high to throw its light on to the tussock. Prompted by the bird's confidence on the previous Saturday, I moved the camera closer. I found the hen most anxious to be at the nest, and, looking inside, perceived the two just-hatched young, which supplied the reason. Then, whilst I looked into the ground-glass plate and focused the camera, I saw an inverted Fantail-Warbler come into the field of vision, hesitate a second at the nest entrance and then enter the nest. The camera lens was only fifteen inches away.

I soon realized that the hen was absolutely fearless. It would come to the nest without hesitation, cling on to the



Female Fantail-Warbler at nest.

Photo. by C. E. Bryant.

front and feed the young birds without those apprehensive glances over the shoulder at the camera, in which nesting birds usually indulge. It was feeding the young birds on small, almost round, slugs about the size of a match head. I quickly became aware that I could touch the bird as it approached or hung on the nest, and from that it was an easy step to taking the bird in my hand. The bird's movements were exceedingly quick and any photographs taken with 1-25th second exposure showed movement. Two pictures, when only 1-50th second exposure was given, suffered from under-exposure, the early morning light being insufficient.

The following Sunday I visited the nest at about 10.30 a.m. From the constant movements of the hen bird feeding the young, in and out of the nest, and on account of the growth of the fledglings, the nest was losing its trim shape a little and the aperture was much enlarged. The four young birds were now about five days old and were already well covered. The hen bird was as assiduous as before and returned to the nest every four or five minutes. The food was now chiefly field-cricket in the larval stage, with an occasional green caterpillar and once a green moth. The bird practically disregarded me and the camera and fed the youngsters unhurriedly and, presumably, without fear. She removed excreta on about one occasion out of each three visits and consumed it before leaving the nest. Although I was only a few inches away I could not see if the excreta were removed from the floor and walls of the nest, because the adult bird practically blocked the entrance from my view, but she did not lean far into the nest to obtain it on any occasion, and I had the *impression* that the young birds themselves picked it up and "handed" it to her. This is only assumption, of course, and although I peered at the nest from the distance of a few inches, time after time, when the action took place, I could not make certain.

Immediately the bird had fed the young it flew away and, as its approach to the nest was rapid and as it poked its head into the opening immediately it reached the nest, I usually found it impossible to act quickly enough to take a photograph before its head became obscured. This I overcame by blocking the entrance with black paper. The bird then hung on to the front of the nest and also made attempts to force an entrance through the bottom and the sides of the structure. It "chirped" occasionally whilst thus engaged, although otherwise silent whilst actually at the nest. On two occasions I kept the nest blocked for as long as five minutes and each time the bird itself ate the "offering" at the end of that period and then departed for more. I was able, of course, to obtain as many photographs as I wished. I simply sat or knelt on the ground right at the nest tussock and manipulated the camera as necessary and the bird came

and went unconcernedly. The black paper blocking the nest is apparent in the accompanying photographs.

The male bird did not visit the nest. Distinguishable by his golden crown, he could be seen, and heard, flying around nearby or sitting on a small wattle about fifty feet away. A favourite occupation of his was flying in circles above the nest, with his peculiar vibrating flight, and calling the while. On a few occasions he came to a point about ten feet from the nest and once a little closer, this last time being the occasion for an "altercation" with both birds scolding harshly.

Prior to blocking the nest I had attempted to ensure the hen's remaining in proximity to the nest by taking from it the food it had for the young, catching the bird for the purpose. This action did have the result, to some extent, of keeping the bird around the nest, but it then hopped about quickly as if distressed at the robbery. On a few occasions it retook the food from me when proffered, but sometimes refused it and flew away. I tried photographing it away from the nest by placing it on a convenient grass blade, but immediately I released it and before I could get my hand away so that it would not be photographed too, most likely out of focus, the bird moved. In order to show how indifferent was the bird to human interference I took a few photographs showing my wife touching the bird.

I can support all that Givens wrote concerning the Fantail-Warblers in the district—their calls, method of approach by forcing a way through the tussock where the nest is built, creeping in like a mouse, the flight and general habits. They certainly appear to obtain the bulk of their food on the ground. It only remains for me to record of my special bird that on January 22, when I visited the nest again, the young birds, at eleven days old, were well marked and capable of fluttering away with a motion something just less than flight, but more than a mere progress along the ground aided by outspread wings. That afternoon, with six other people within a few feet, the hen still allowed me to touch her and close my hand around her, although her visits to the nest were then at about twenty minutes intervals only.

The nest was formed chiefly of small pieces of the tussock grass with a few other grasses woven in. No leaves of any plant were used. It was lined with thistledown. The bird did not bring additional lining to the nest whilst I watched—and such an action would have been unnecessary, considering the superlatively-cosy and complete appearance of the structure.

The Gould commemorative number will be issued, if sufficient material is available, in October next, not July.



Female Fantail-Warbler with food for young, unconcerned
at finger at nest.

Photo. by C. E. Bryant.