



Nest and eggs of Hoary-headed Grebe.

Photo. by C. E. Bryant.

Photographing the Hoary-headed Grebe

By C. E. BRYANT, Melbourne, Victoria

In Mr. Jack Jones's notes on birds at Fishermen's Bend, Melbourne (*The Emu*, vol. XXXVII, p. 276) reference is made to Hoary-headed Grebes. I was advised of the first nests found by Mr. Jones, at which both he and Mr. C. L. Lang had vainly endeavoured to photograph the birds, but, upon my visiting them, I found that strong winds had wrecked them and the eggs had disappeared. Later Jones found new nests, and in his company I visited the locality on Sunday, February 13.

There was one nest containing a very stained egg and, close together, three other nests with four, three and three eggs respectively. From the first nest mentioned two young Grebes had already been led by the adults some days before, and the solitary remaining egg appeared at first deserted—or addled. Nevertheless, the adult Grebes bestowed upon it intermittent attention and occasionally one of the pair spent some little time sitting on it.

The other nests contained comparatively fresh eggs. All the nests were composed of masses of green algae, which I had identified as a *Microspora*, with which were mixed slight wisps of two blue-green algae *Gloeocapsa* and *Lyngbya*. The masses forming the nests were about eighteen inches in depth and extended to the pond bottom, and they spread out under the surface to a diameter of about the same extent. In most cases they had been tethered in a somewhat haphazard manner to reeds of the knotted club-rush (*Scirpus nodosus*) which grew sparsely around, both in the water and on a few places on the banks. One nest, which I found later, and a photograph of which is reproduced, was firmly wedged between two clumps of the rushes, which gave it both protection and stability. The eggs lay on a few grass and dried rush stems in the centre of the algae masses.

Benefitting by the experience of the two previous attempts to photograph the Grebes, I arranged for Jones and two others to sit with me on the bank for a minute or two, and then to depart, leaving me stretched out on the damp sand. The nest I worked upon was about 150 to 200 feet out from the bank, and there was no cover on the bank at the point nearest the nest. A special difficulty was the floating algae, which continually caught on the thread to the camera and carried it below the surface, so that the weight threatened to release the shutter. The weather was dull and cold and that fact possibly induced the birds to assume anxiety. After some time a bird, following upon many preliminary false alarms when it gave evidence of settling on to the nest, actually did so, and photo. number one was obtained. Four

plates were exposed that morning, but development afterwards proved that none was successful—all showing movement.

It was most interesting to watch the Grebes around the nests. The individual pairs kept very much together. They would come up to the immediate vicinity of their nests and appear to be about to take the risk of brooding under the camera, and would then suddenly dive and reappear many feet away. On one occasion a stiff breeze sprang up suddenly. The vim with which the Grebes worked in reinforcing the edges of the nests was amazing. A succession of quick dives was indulged in by the birds and each reappearance from beneath the surface meant more of the algae, brought doubtless from the base of the nest, being added to the weather side of the mass. Wavelets broke over the nests whilst the birds worked, but the Grebes made no attempt to cover the eggs. In fact, only poor attempts at concealing the eggs were made by the Grebes during the several hours during which I watched the birds.

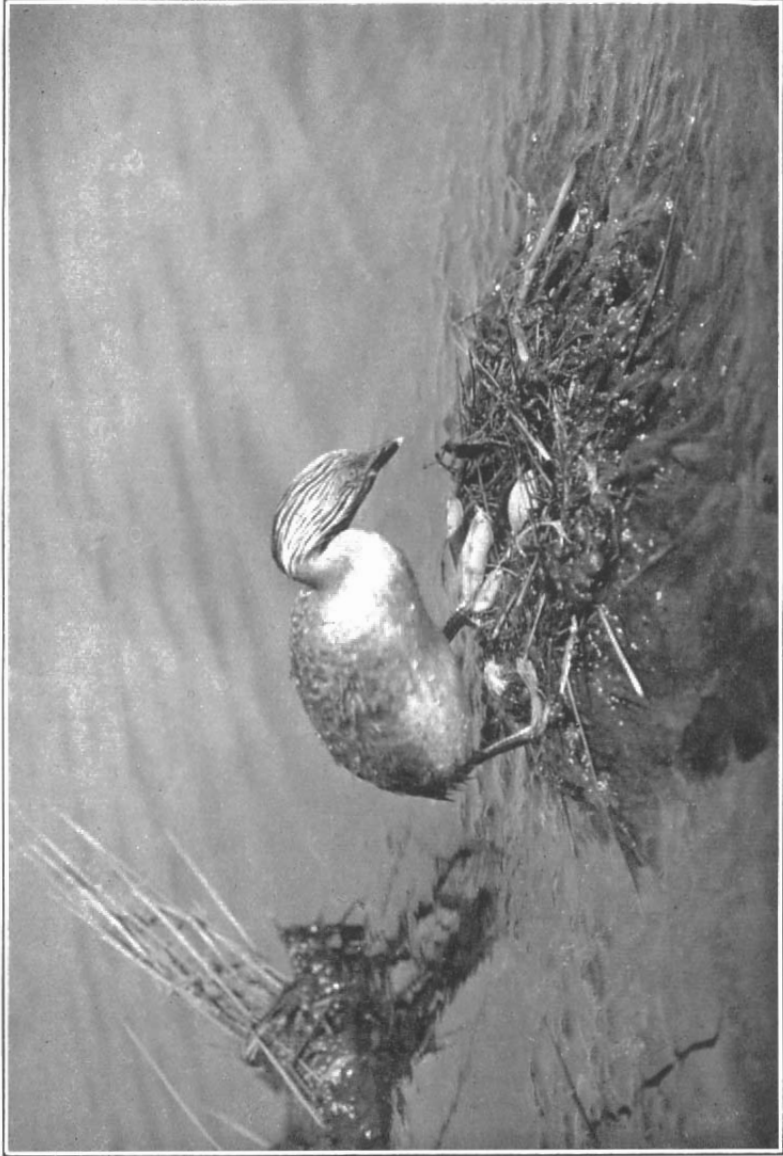
Grebes are exceedingly quick in their movements, and their arrival on the eggs was a performance of some interest. They appeared to propel themselves out of the water by a sudden jerk, alighting well up on the nest, thence clambering awkwardly on to the eggs. Generally, as soon as it settled down, the sitting bird gathered stray grasses and beakfulls of algae as it brooded and tucked them around it.

On the following Wednesday morning—a sunny one—I reached the pond at 6 a.m. The same pair of birds were “victimized.” They were not unduly perturbed at the camera, but neither did they appear anxious to brood. Possibly the weather was warm enough for the eggs not to need attention—eggs which must be able to be subjected to a good deal of damp and cold without detriment. I pressed into service, for a few minutes, some workmen excavating nearby, requesting them to stand around me and then depart in a body, and the subterfuge must have allayed any fears that the birds possessed for soon a Grebe returned, made its usual suspicious investigation, and then shot up on to the nest. The workmen, who had retired to a short distance away, appeared to consider bird photography in the same light as Dean Swift considered fishing, when he described the latter as consisting of a “string with a worm at one end and a fool at the other”—substituting my camera for the worm.

Three pictures were ultimately obtained, but only the last, reproduced here, was worthy of printing. But all the negatives showed one feature clearly—that the left foot of the Grebe was abnormal in being much enlarged. The abnormality is plainly apparent in the accompanying plate. An atrophied foot, or other part, is more usual, but I have

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Photo, by C. E. Bryant.

Hoary-headed Grebe at nest.

no explanation to offer for the enlargement. It was not, presumably, a mere swelling of the lobes, for a glance at the picture shows the nail at the end of the toe, indicating that the bone is lengthened. The fact that every negative shows the same abnormal bird suggests that in this case one bird only carried out the brooding. One egg remained in the nest at this stage: the four had been reduced first to two and then to the single egg. The other eggs had definitely not hatched out and their fate is unknown—possibly a Pacific Gull was to blame.

Admittedly Grebes are not often seen to fly, but any suggestion that they fly only when hard pressed is incorrect. Several times I noticed a Grebe—and I have seen the same with the Black-throated species—rise from the water and fly, with its peculiar scuttling flight, across a large expanse of water, actuated, evidently, by no other motive than quickly to attain some other point.

Mr. Jones informs me that he found another Grebe's nest at the Bend on April 3, 1938, with two stained eggs.

Jones's list of birds observed at the Bend is increased by three species—the Spur-winged Plover (*Lobibyx novæ-hollandiæ*), a small flock appearing to be resident (the omission of this species from the list was an oversight); and the Tippet Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) and the Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*), the latter two species noted by me some time ago within half a mile of the pond where the Hoary-headed Grebes were watched.

Mimicry in Wild Cockatoos.—I have often wondered if Cockatoos, which are clever mimics in captivity, ever indulge in vocal mimicry in the wild state. I have not heard them. It is possible, of course, that, like the Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and certain other known mimics, they confine their mimicry to an undertone and therefore are not heard. In May this year I received a letter from Miss Ruth Schleicher, of Hazelbrook, on the Blue Mountains, in which she says:

"I was very surprised yesterday to hear a Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo mimicking a Kookaburra. My sister heard it, too; and my brother, who was farther away and did not see the bird, supposed it must have been some child trying to imitate a Kookaburra. As the Cockatoo settled on the tree, it gave a deep-toned chuckle, and repeated the chuckle several times in the high key of the bird's normal call. It could not manage the full range of the Kookaburra's laugh, but the chuckle was an unmistakable imitation and quite well sustained. I hope that I shall hear another performance, as the Black Cockatoo is about quite often at this time of the year."

If there is no doubt about the interpretation of the bird's call, we can add the Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*) to the ever-growing list of bird mimics.—M. S. R. SHARLAND, Sydney, N.S.W., 15/5/38.