

Notes on the Little Friar-bird

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

In *The Emu* of January, 1939 (vol. XXXVIII, p. 341), there is an article by R. S. Miller dealing with the Little Friar-bird (*Philemon citreogularis*). Mr. Miller's experience with the species, especially his Queensland observations, were interesting indeed.

Mr. Miller, from his observations when he was in the Maryborough (Queensland) district, expresses doubt that *Philemon citreogularis* is a nectar-feeding bird, even though he quotes Dr. W. D. K. MacGillivray as having stated that the birds had been seen by him near Blackall feasting at the flowers of the queamurra (*Eremophila bignoniæflora*). I have long known that the Little Friar-bird is a nectar-feeder and is particularly fond of the nectar of the red bottle-brush (*Callistemon lanceolatus*).

On March 8, 1939, I commenced a record of the feeding, migratory movements and general habits of the species. My notes will probably be of interest, so I record them here.

During March, 1939, several species of mistletoe were in full bloom. The blossoms attracted many honey-feeding birds, but, although Little Friar-birds were still in numbers, they did not join in the feast. Their food at the time appeared to be mostly insects. As the month advanced the birds gradually decreased in numbers and were missing from the district after March 27. The birds were not again seen until their return from their migration on July 13, 1939, when two birds were seen feeding on insects rising from a swamp. In July many birds were about and their familiar calls were much in evidence. On July 31 they were plentiful and very pugnacious, chasing all birds, large and small. At that time they were on a mixed diet of insects and nectar, the latter being obtained from various species of trees and shrubs.

On August 15 it was noticed that the Friar-birds had paired and were searching for suitable nesting sites. Nesting had commenced by the beginning of September and was in full swing by September 7.

I observed that young were being fed in the nest after the first week of October. Insects appeared to be the only food given to the young birds, although the parents were on a mixed diet of insects and nectar from red bottle-brush blooms.

By November 29 young birds—usually three to the brood—had been out of the nest for the greater part of the month and still appeared to be on an insect diet. Spotted gum, mistletoe and red bottle-brush were well in bloom and attracted noisy crews of adult Friar-birds of both the Little

and Noisy species. At that period the grasshopper plague had reached us and the Little Friar-birds turned their attention to them and caught them in great numbers for their own food and for their young birds. During December it was noticed that the young birds were feeding themselves and had joined the older birds at the nectar feast and were among the grasshoppers.

On December 15 I noted that both the old birds and the young were daily visitors to the *Bougainvillea* blooms in my garden, apparently finding the blooms very attractive. From an examination the blossoms did not appear to have much nectar, although evidence of the nectar content is plain enough by the number of hawk moths and other night-feeding honey-loving insects that visit the blooms by night.

A second nesting period commenced by the end of December. On January 7, 1940, I examined a nest which contained four eggs. That, I think, is an unusual number for a clutch of this species. The nest was about 12 feet from the ground and was placed in the drooping foliage of a form of black wattle. The nest was composed of grass, small twigs and rootlets, and was lined with rootlets and cow hair. It was fastened to five separate twigs with cotton, string and spider web. The inside measurements of the nest were 4 inches in diameter by 3 inches deep.

The ground colour of the eggs was pinkish-white. Two eggs were banded by a circle of purple and chestnut markings around the larger end. Two had a base of the same-coloured markings but no distinct zone. Three of the eggs were marked with fine spots—the fourth with large spots; this last was heavily incubated, whilst the first three were but lightly incubated.*

The birds defended the nest savagely while I was at the nest taking measurements.

The broods of the second nesting period were fed on an insect diet, as had been the case with the broods of the earlier nesting period.

During February, March, and the early part of April the birds were plentiful and nectar formed the greater part of their food supply. After the middle of April the birds began to decrease in numbers and all had departed by April 27, 1940.

On May 5 I made a trip to the Dawson River country which, by direct line from here, is about 250 miles north-west. During my stay there from May 5 to 15 the Little Friar-bird was observed in large numbers with Noisy Friar-

*An extra egg, different in markings, and heavily incubated, suggests the possibility of a Cuckoo's egg being included, though the description does not tally with such an egg.—Ed.

birds and many other species of nectar-eating birds, feeding on a sugary scale which infested the leaves of the round-leaved box trees. From that it would appear that the general movement during winter is in a northerly direction.

I have not been able to ascertain whether the birds remained on the Dawson during the winter months. While I was there they showed no inclination to move farther north.

Vocal Mimicry of the Brown Thornbill.—On several occasions observers have recorded the powers of mimicry which these birds use when alarmed or excited by the presence of a person near a nest containing young (*vide*, for example, Hindwood, *Emu*, vol. xxxii, p. 299). I, too, have noticed this habit on various occasions, but, until recently, thought that the birds would exercise it only when they had young in the nest and were excited in some way.

On March 25, 1940, while rambling in the bush near Talbingo, N.S.W., I heard a quiet "whisper-song" somewhat similar to that of a Silvereye. A few moments later the singer, a Brown Thornbill, was located in a tree about ten or twelve feet from the ground, and about twenty feet away. I watched it for about ten minutes without moving any closer, and, during that time, it imitated the piping call of the Yellow Robin and the trill of the Blue Wren. The mimicry was practically continuous, there being only one or two momentary breaks while the bird stopped to catch several insects. The two calls were the only notes uttered. The bird did not appear at all agitated or excited and seemed quite oblivious to my presence. The mimicry was not the result of my approaching (and thus exciting the bird) but rather the reverse, for I first heard it while still some distance away, and well out of sight of the tree in which the bird was singing.

Whilst I do not think that the Brown Thornbill can be classed as a regular mimic such as, say, the "Heath-Wren" (*Hylacola pyrrhopygia*) or the Silvereye, there apparently are occasions, quite apart from those associated with the safety of its young, when it will imitate other bird calls out of sheer enjoyment, and not as the result of some emotional stress.—J. WATERHOUSE, Albury, N.S.W., 4/7/40.

EDITOR'S NOTE.—This contribution, received before publication of the August, 1940, *Emu*, is interesting, in its reference to birds mimicking under emotional stress. A. H. Chisholm (vol. XL, p. 120) discounts N. H. E. McDonald's claim that birds become "excited and voluble" (vol. xxxix, p. 300—not p. 298) during mimicry. Excitement such as that instanced by J. Waterhouse and K. A. Hindwood, provoked by fear or alarm, is, of course, distinct from that which is a mere incident of the mimicry, but there is possibly sufficient connection to justify a suggestion of relationship.