

Incubation of the Spotted Nightjar

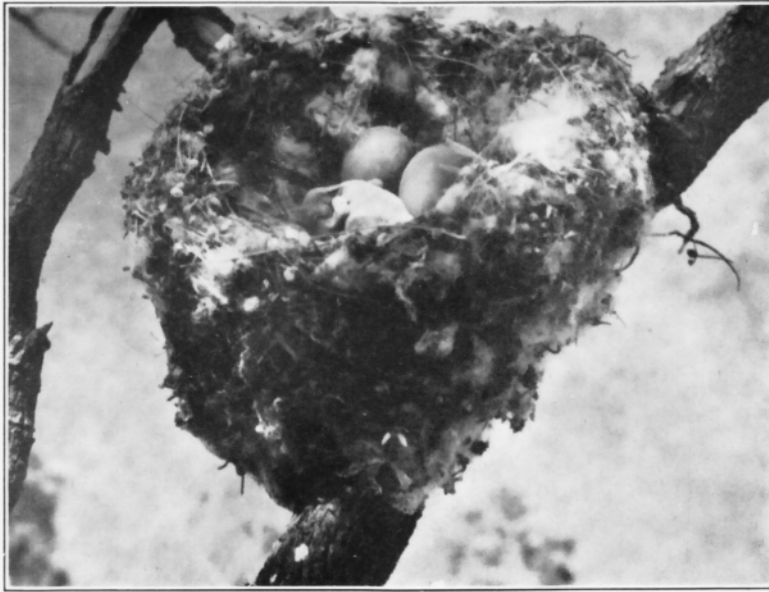
By P. A. BOURKE, Gilgandra, N.S.W.

Until the present season (1941) I was of the opinion that the Spotted Nightjar (*Eurostopodus guttatus*) was rare in this district. However, the finding of three nests since October would seem to indicate that the species is not as rare as I had thought. There is, some six miles from my habitation, the western boundary of a State Forest composed of (chiefly) pines (*Callitris* spp.) and ironbark (*Eucalyptus crebra*) with scattered clumps of various mallee eucalypts. Apparently these mallee clumps are the favoured nesting sites of the nightjars, for it has been in such localities that the three nests were found.

The first was found on October 15, and I was able to visit the spot six days later. Until then I had been inclined to scoff at the protective coloration of birds, for the 'invisibility' of dotterels and so on had never impressed me much. But the way that the brooding nightjar blended into its surroundings amazed me. From a distance of ten yards it was impossible to be certain that the bird was at the nest, and it was a real 'eye-opener' for me. The bird sat with closed eyes until I reached a spot about four feet away and paused to examine it. She (?) then flushed suddenly and silently, flew some twenty feet away and settled on the ground, where she took several steps before squatting in a peculiar position with lowered head and with the tail-tip raised until it was about six inches from the ground. In that position she exactly resembled a piece of broken branch, and I was unable to see her again after I had examined the egg. At this stage the egg was a pale, but bright, yellow-green with a few irregular, purplish-brown markings.

Since I had only about an hour to spend there, there was no time to erect a hide, but seeing that she allowed such a close approach I decided to dispense with one, and merely set up the camera, well camouflaged with bushes, let out some ten feet of cord, and went away. Half an hour later I returned, to find the bird on the nest, so I pulled the cord. She took no notice of the click of the shutter, but flew when I approached to re-set the camera. As she rose she uttered a grunting sound. She alighted again as before, but after several seconds rose again and flew some distance away. Owing to the 'spotty' light coming through the trees the photograph was a failure—or rather it was not completely satisfactory.

On November 6 I was again able to visit the nest, and found that the egg had changed colour, being much duller, and, to all appearances, heavily incubated. The bird posed again, but I could not get her to face in any direction but head or tail on towards the camera.



Nest containing nestling and two eggs of the Ground Cuckoo-Shrike.
Photo. by A. R. McGill.



Spotted Nightjar brooding.
Photo. by P. A. Bourke.

I was unable to visit the nest again, and am indebted to Mr. T. H. Barton, the forest ranger, a keen observer, who was responsible for the discovery of the nest, for the following: "I visited the nightjar's nest on 8th inst., and found it still unhatched. After that I was able to visit the spot every afternoon. On 12th the egg had lost all its greenish colour, and was dull cream, like a bit of old ivory. On 16th I got to the nest about 5 p.m. and found that the egg was chipped, so returned very early next morning and found the young one, after a long search, about 12 yards (14 of my steps) from the nest spot. It was a lovely little thing, about as big as a day old chicken and chocolate brown in colour. After that I couldn't find it again. That makes at least 33 days that the nightjar broods."

The second nest came to grief. Some men were hauling logs through a patch of mallee on October 25, when a nightjar flushed from under the leading horse's nose. The horse reared, and in coming down, trod on the egg. The third nest was found on December 6, and possibly belonged to the birds whose egg was broken, as the nest was rather less than a mile from that one, and again in a patch of mallee. I visited it on November 13, and found that the egg was rather duller than the first one examined. At my first approach the bird allowed me to get almost close enough to take a photograph with a 3-inch lens, but flushed while I was trying to make up my mind whether to risk the small image. She alighted only a few steps away, turned towards me, opened her bill, and elevated her spotted wings in a manner reminiscent of an alighting tern. Before I could focus the camera she flew away. While I was setting up she flew overhead, and alighted in the scrub some distance away. Having set up the camera, I let out cord to reach a tree ten yards or so away, and retired. Returning in an hour I found the bird brooding, and reasonably clear of shadow (it was a glaring, cloudless day, and the nest was well sheltered by overhead growth) so made an exposure.

My approach disturbed the bird, which flew away a few feet, alighted, took a few steps, well up off the ground, and not in the usual lizard-like manner, rose again, and flew some fifty yards away. I departed hastily to the shade of some nearby trees and rolled a 'smoke,' but before I had finished it she returned to the nest. I took three pictures of her before leaving, and they were all successful.

This egg was still unhatched on December 27, when I left the district. One of the timber-getters told me that on one occasion when he flushed the bird it flew on to a log nearby and perched along it for several seconds, and that the grunting noise was uttered while it was there.