

## Nesting Notes on the Ground Cuckoo-Shrike

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It was my good fortune, whilst recently spending a holiday at Deniliquin, New South Wales, to receive an invitation to stay a few days at Mr. L. Moore's 'Calgary' property, thirty miles north-east of the town, and situate amidst flat open-timbered country devoted to farming and pastoral pursuits.

During my short sojourn there I was fortunate to list a few birds with which I had not previously been acquainted, amongst them the Ground Cuckoo-Shrike (*Pteropodocys maxima*), a slightly larger and attractive relative of the Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina nova-hollandia*), but apparently much rarer and with a lesser territorial distribution than that species. A number of years ago, when the late Dr. Leach's popular *An Australian Bird Book* was my sole source of information, I regarded the birds marked as very rare as those with which I would probably not be fortunate enough to gain acquaintance during my proposed 'ornithological career,' and believed them to be 'reserved' for the pioneering scientist. Although that assumption has long since gone, I still infer that the species concerned is a rare bird at its south-eastern Australian limit (which apparently is the northern portion of Victoria), and consequently may be little known in that part of New South Wales I was visiting at the time, which is but a short distance from the Victorian border. It is evidently a rare species in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, a district approximately a hundred miles north-east from Deniliquin, according to Mr. K. A. Hindwood's article on "Birds of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area" in *The Emu*, vol. XXXIX, page 219. However, it is possibly more widespread as it reaches farther north, and according to observations in north-western New South Wales, it is reasonably common there, as obviously it would be in various other portions of its range throughout Australia.

Whilst returning across country late one afternoon, I disturbed a family party of White-winged Choughs (*Corcorax melanorhamphus*) from the ground, and when they attempted to settle in a nearby Murray pine tree (*Callitris glauca*) approximately 100 yards distant from me, I noticed they were immediately driven off by another bird, the determined behaviour of which aroused my curiosity. Focussing my field-glasses on it, I could not definitely identify it, but noticed that it, in turn, was being attacked by a pair of Willie Wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), some White-browed Wood-Swallows (*Artamus superciliosus*) and

a male White-winged Triller (*Lalage tricolor*). I anticipated it to be some species of hawk, and the Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus axillaris*) was fully impressed on me as the most likely as I moved carefully forward to make sure of identification before it was disturbed. On my arriving closer the smaller birds quickly retired from the scene and the larger one, to my surprise, quietly moved on to a nest at the topmost part of the tree, which had escaped my notice previously. I was then able to identify it as the Ground Cuckoo-Shrike.

With curiosity aroused and with very little difficulty presenting itself in the way of climbing, I went up the tree, and, although my ascent was by no means noiseless, the bird did not leave the nest until I was practically beside it. I was then given the treatment accorded the original trespassers, but was handicapped by being unable to retreat as easily as they did. The attack, which was kept up incessantly, was soon found to be all 'bluff,' and no actual blow was made or seemed likely to be made whilst I was inspecting the nest, which contained two eggs and a young bird just out of the egg. The pale-green eggs, smudged with brownish indistinct markings, mostly on the larger end, were large for the size of the bird. The young bird was blind, featherless, and lay completely helpless. The nest differed considerably in size from those of other members of the family with which I was familiar, being large and stoutly built and composed almost entirely of wool, bound together by numerous plant-stems and rootlets. It was placed on a horizontal branch high in the tree, close to the main trunk, and was almost entirely devoid of overhead protection.

I retired to a convenient distance and watched proceedings. Within five minutes the bird had returned, and within that time also I had discovered that the Willie Wagtails and a pair of Trillers also occupied nests amongst the lower branches of the same tree. In my eagerness to see the larger bird's nest, I had not noticed either of the other two as I made my way through the branches. The smaller birds had escaped my attention for the moment, but during my few minutes' quiet observation the finding of their nests was relatively easy. Another climb was necessary and I found both contained eggs, four in the Wagtail's and two in the Triller's. White-winged Trillers were abundant in the district during my visit, and, contrary to the general rule, the females appeared to be in the majority.

Three different species of birds nesting in the one tree at the same time is not a rarity, of course. I had previously recorded four, representing four different families, and others probably have noted more than that number. Often the tree selected, as was the case in the instance of the four mentioned, is one near habitation and also conspicuous by

being a particularly large shady one, or isolated to a large degree amongst open surroundings. This particular tree was, however, one of five hundred or so scattered profusely over the area, and any other tree would have been just as suitable (according to my judgment) for breeding purposes.

It seems likely that the largest bird was the original 'tenant' of the tree, as the eggs of the other occupiers had not developed to the same extent, assuming that each nest would require approximately the same building period. Possibly the two smaller birds readily seized the advantage of the protection offered by the Cuckoo-Shrike's occupying a nest in a commanding position overhead. Nevertheless, the two 'gate-crashers' (which appeared to be on the best of terms between themselves) would not tolerate the other nesting occupants amongst the lower branches of the tree, treating them as one would expect them to deal with a Kookaburra or other predatory bird, and seemed contented only when they were actually occupied on their nest. The male and female Cuckoo-Shrike were not seen together in the tree at any one time, yet each was observed to take family responsibility. I could not distinguish male from female, but noticed them 'change over' on two occasions. While one bird was occupied on the nest the other kept constant vigil on a large tree 50 to 60 yards distant.

Whilst the Cuckoo-Shrikes quickly dispersed larger birds, such as the Choughs that entered their 'domain,' they were not seen to molest smaller ones such as the two discussed or the numerous Wood-Swallows which were particularly common in most of the trees around. They were, however, singularly pugnacious towards their own kind, for whilst photographing up the tree the following day I wondered at the cause of the sudden hurried departure of both birds and, following them in the field-glasses, I saw them stage a 'battle royal' with another pair of the same species that had evidently wandered casually into their territory. Soon the four, still engaged in their dispute, were lost to sight in the hazy atmosphere and fully five minutes elapsed before the nesting birds returned.

Ornithological field-work is made up of such happenings and if one is satisfactorily solved to all concerned, more are soon unfolded. It is the uncertainty, the unexpected happenings, and the unsolved problems that give it the required fascination and interest for all present and future work. Of photography I can say very little, as my efforts in that regard at present are only in their elementary stage and my camera is hardly suitable for the work. However, after a long effort arranging the tripod and camera amongst the topmost branches, endeavouring to secure the bird at the nest, I found the working distance much too close, so I contented myself with an exposure of the nest and eggs.