

'Birds of a Feather'

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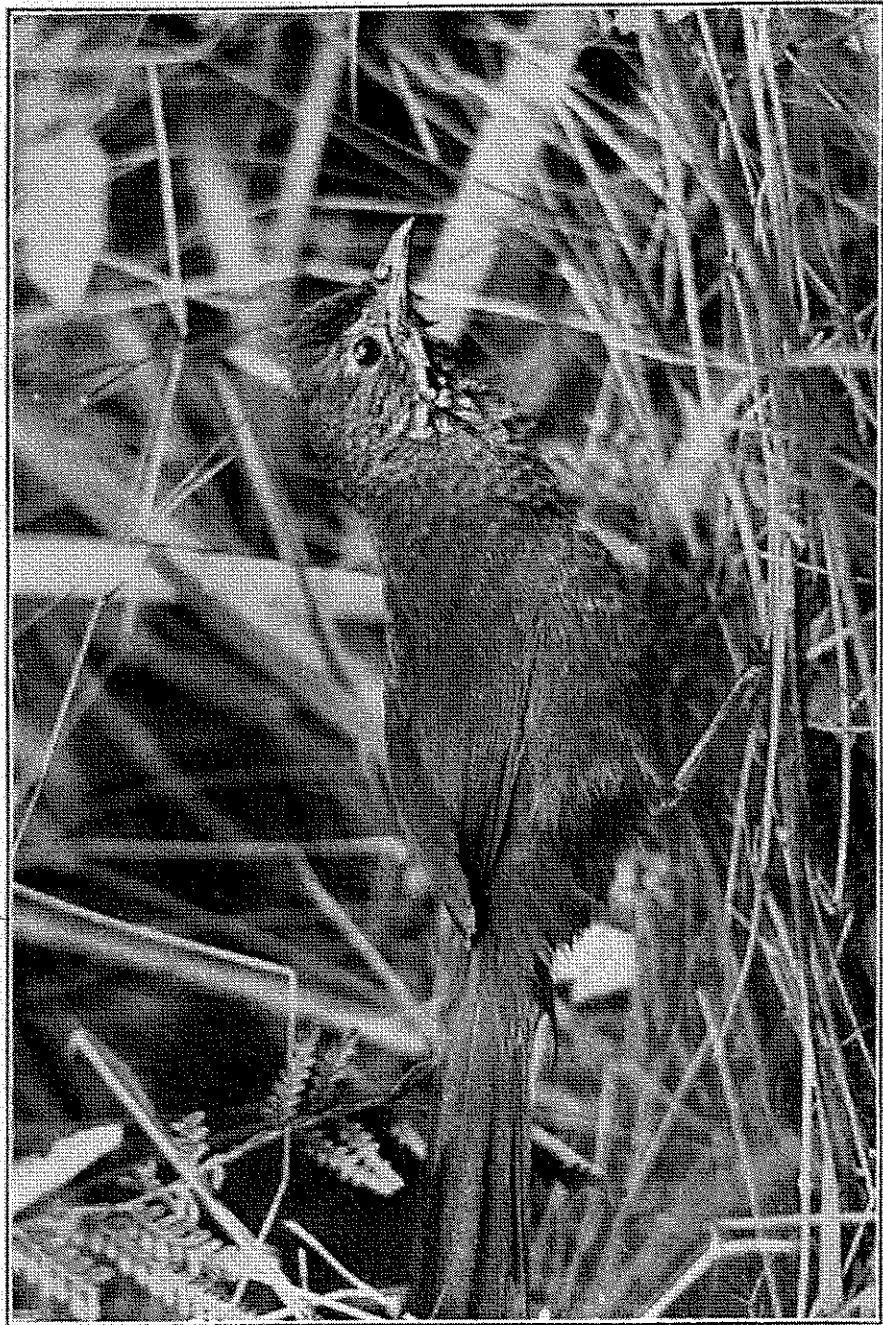
Notes on the Rufous Bristle-bird

By CLARENCE L. LANG, Hampton, Vic.

It was Professor McCoy who first described this species and named it *Sphenura broadbenti*, in honour of the collector Kendall Broadbent, an ornithologist of the Queensland Museum. The generic name, first given by Lichtenstein, was found to have been employed previously and the generic name *Dasyornis*, given by Vigors and Horsfield, in 1827, when describing the Eastern Bristle-bird (*D. brachypterus*) was applied. It seems remarkable that the Rufous species was not discovered until over sixty years after the Eastern Bristle-bird, considering it is by no means rare in its particular habitat.

The Rufous Bristle-bird has a limited distribution, being found on the coastline west of Port Phillip Bay, extending inland at the Otway Ranges and continuing on the coast to possibly as far as the Mount Lofty Ranges, South Australia. A specimen in the H. L. White collection was secured on the Coorong, South Australia, between the sand-dunes and the sea. The species is also found in the south-west of Western Australia and is confined to about thirty miles of coastal country between Cape Naturaliste and Cape Mentelle. My observations have been confined to the vicinity of Lorne, in the Otway Ranges. I have seen the birds on the sea-blown slopes where the vegetation is a few feet high, with the spray of the sea sweeping across; on the steep sides of the ranges facing the sea; and in the forest valleys where the undergrowth is extremely dense.

One's first impressions of any new species are always interesting. When passing along the Great Ocean Road on my first visit to Lorne I heard the call of a bird that was very much like the notes of a Pilot-bird. The bird later proved to be the Rufous Bristle-bird. To me there is a great similarity in the call of these two species. The call varies considerably, but may be described as 'cheep cheep chew chew-ee-e,' loud and penetrating, which is answered



Rufous Bristle-bird approaching nest.

Photo. by C. L. Lang.

by the mate with a single note 'twik.' There is also an alarm note, 'tweek,' loud and staccato, which the birds utter when alarmed. I have stood within three feet of the birds when calling and the rich resonant notes are something to be remembered. I was also impressed by the general likeness of the bird to the female English Blackbird, particularly at a distance. It has the same habit of running with the head forward and tail slightly elevated; the general coloration is also similar. The bird is rather a poor flyer. I have never seen it fly more than a few feet above the ground, except when crossing the river or a road cutting. The bird prefers to keep to the floor of the forest, running with bursts of speed, and occasionally mounting a low stick or stump to survey the vicinity or utter its call.

Two years ago I heard birds calling in the vicinity of the St. George River, Lorne, and suspected that they had a nest nearby. After waiting for about thirty minutes I saw a bird gathering food on the opposite bank of the river, then cross the river and enter the dense scrub quite close to me. I made a search but was unsuccessful in finding the nest. The bird was soon noticed gathering food on the open hillside, and then, with food in its beak, to enter the scrub about thirty yards from where it had entered previously. Similar actions continued for some time but still I could not find the nest. Feeling baffled—because once the bird entered the scrub it was lost to sight—I was contemplating the next move, when I saw the bird, appearing to be carrying food, cross the track and enter the scrub about 250 yards from where I was investigating. Hastening to the spot, I noticed a clump of sword grass about thirty feet in from the track. This seemed a likely place for a nest, and sure enough, on investigation I located the nest, about four feet from the ground. There were two young birds in the nest. The birds had been travelling a considerable distance, running through the dense scrub on leaving or returning to the nest.

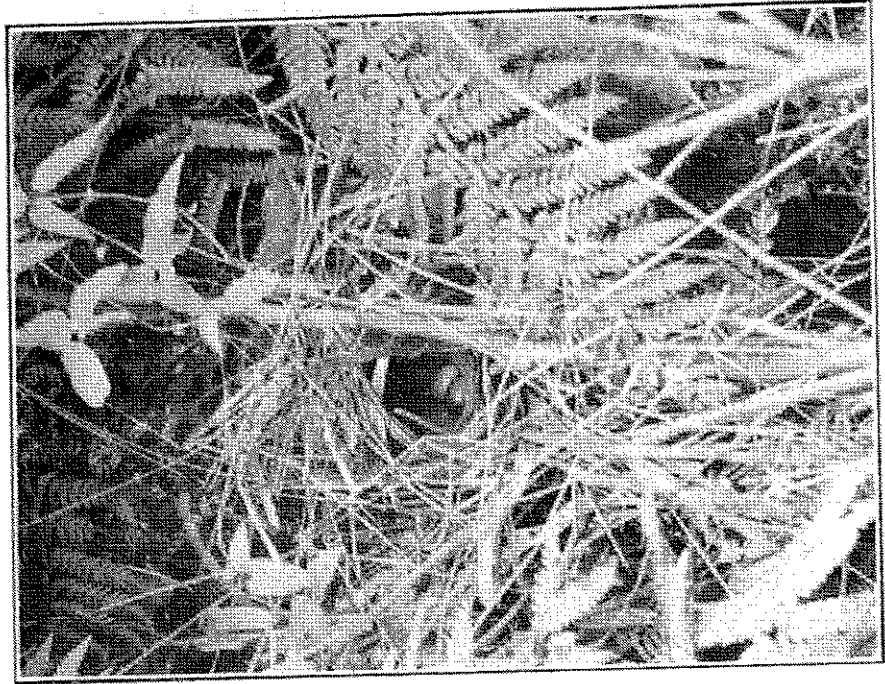
The nest is a bulky structure, with an entrance at the side, composed, usually, of fine sticks, coarse grasses or sedges, and having the inside lined with fine grass. One nest that I discovered this last season was lined with wool. The nest is usually placed about four feet above the ground and a favoured situation is a clump of sword grass. I have found nests in a bunch of dead sticks surrounded by soft bracken fern and another nest in quite an open space among dead sticks, though on the ground.

The nesting season extends from September to December, under normal conditions, with the height of the nesting period October and November. The birds are very local and keep to a limited area. I have found the nest of presumably the one pair of birds in the same locality year after



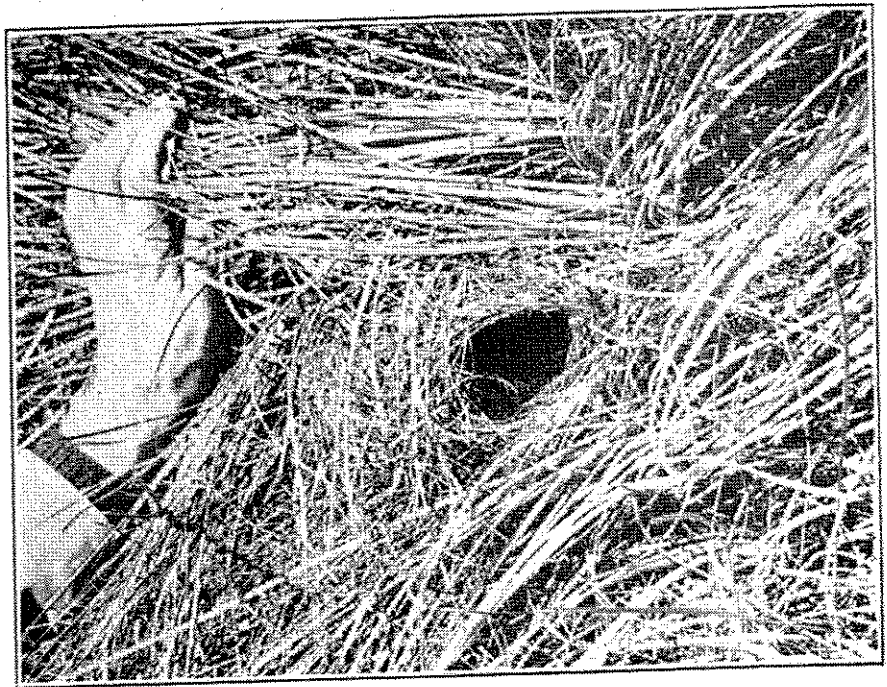
Type of scrub frequented by the Rufous Bristle-bird
at Lorne, Victoria.

Photo. by C. L. Lang.



Nest of the Rufous Bristle-bird.

Photo. by C. L. Lang.



Nest of Eastern Bristle-bird. Photographed on
October 28, 1945.

Photo. by K. A. Hindwood.

year. Nevertheless the nest is not necessarily close to that of the previous season but from sixty to one hundred yards distant.

The bird lays a clutch of two eggs, rather large for the size of the bird. There is a great variation in coloration, even in eggs of the same region. The egg, when freshly laid, is pink, and is covered with rather large blotches of brown to the other extreme of being so finely speckled with brown dots as to appear as a wholly reddish-brown egg. In all clutches of eggs that I have examined, including nine clutches in the H. L. White collection, as well as those in the field, one egg is always decidedly lighter in colour than the other. This also seems to be a characteristic of the eggs of *D. brachypterus* and *D. longirostris*.

The food consists of caterpillars, beetles, moths and the like, also seeds. I have seen the birds working over rather bare areas apparently gathering very small seeds. The young are fed exclusively on insects. One would imagine that the Rufous Bristle-bird, living in such an environment, would be extremely shy, but I have not found it so, and have had no difficulty in obtaining a series of photographs. After the first few visits to the nest the birds seemed to take no notice of the camera, other than to eye it with suspicion occasionally. This has enabled me to obtain a close-up view of this handsome bird. The general appearance is brown, breast lighter, throat mottled dusky, wings and crown of head rufous. A notable feature are the strong bristles projecting from the gape. Another feature is the erection of the feathers on the crown of the head, which gives the bird the appearance of having a crest. At the same time the feathers of the tail are often fanned out.

On November 23, 1945, I witnessed a very fine display by this species. I observed a bird on the tourist track at St. George River, Lorne, feeding on what appeared to be small seeds. Suddenly it gave its loud characteristic call which was answered by the 'twik' of its mate from the scrub beside the track. This bird then joined the one on the track and they gave a very fine display. With wings slightly drooped and outspread, tail feathers fanned out and crown feathers erected, they would face each other, bowing, then run in a short circle and stop, and jump sideways several times. Then the performance would be repeated. I witnessed this display for about three minutes—till the birds were disturbed by tourists coming along the track. This is the only occasion I have seen such a display and do not know if it is usual with this species as observations are difficult owing to the birds keeping to the thick scrub.

Belcher's *Birds of the District of Geelong* contains some interesting notes on the species.