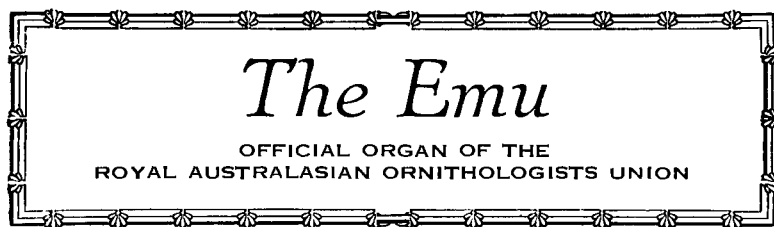




**Swamp-Harrier with young.**

Photo. by Author.



‘Birds of a Feather’

VOL. 47]

OCTOBER, 1947

[PART 2

## Swamp-Harrier's Sense of Smell

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In Tasmania the Swamp-Harrier (*Circus approximans*) is exceeded in numbers only by the Brown Hawk (*Falco berigora*); these are the commonest of the birds of prey inhabiting the island. Marshes, grain crops, and bracken-covered hill slopes are the Swamp-Harrier's nesting places. Summer harvesting uncovers many of its nests and the knife of the reaper frequently breaks eggs and beheads young birds. The Swamp-Harrier has not yet learned that the oat crop which gives such efficient concealment in the early part of the season will be its undoing at harvest time some weeks later.

Usually with eyes on the reaper or watching the process of sheaf binding, the tractor operator fails to see the large stick and grass nest in the tall grain and so the cutter takes all before it. Helpless young ones, often only a week or two old, meet an untimely end. Occasionally, however, a gap in the crop where the adult birds have trampled down the grain around the nest is noticed, on a previous round, so that when the reaper comes to it on the following circuit an effort is usually made to avoid the nest. Some operators have stopped and lifted the young birds out of the way of the knife; others have left a narrow margin of grain around the nest as some kind of protection, though country boys are generally quick to investigate the reason, seeing this section uncut, and they will interfere with eggs or young. Usually, however, the young birds are fully exposed. Shorn of the protecting cover, the parents may then desert their young. This hawk is, in fact, one of the most ‘temperamental’ species with which I have had any association and will desert the nest at the slightest provocation.

Almost every grain field of any size contains a breeding pair in early summer, the nest always being placed on the ground or amongst the bases of thistles, with a screen of tall grain stalks about it. I have never found a Swamp-Harrier's nest in a tree, nor do I know of anyone's having done so. The tall rushes of estuarine marshes and freshwater swamps also are its nesting places and there it enjoys

far more security than in the temporary concealment of a crop, which proves a pitfall at harvest time.

In winter most of the Swamp-Harrier population leaves the State. In June and July, however, one sees a stray bird or two, along the reedy edges of the Derwent River in the south and also among the marshes of the Tamar, in the north, as well as in the same kind of environment on the east coast. The species may be said to be a partial migrant.

In a crop at Granton, last December, a Swamp-Harrier's nest was uncovered by the reaper, and the two young ones, then half-grown, along with two addled eggs, did not meet the fate that so many of their kin suffer in similar circumstances. The sympathetic farmer built a rough shelter for them from the oaten sheaves, and the parents eventually found them there and continued to feed them. During the next day or two they left this shelter and moved some distance down the slope of a hill, taking cover under one of the stooks, making their whereabouts known by shrill cries whenever one or other of the parents floated low over the stubble, usually with the remains of a bird in its talons.

There it was that I found them, clothed in greyish down, with the black edges of wing and tail feathers just showing through the juvenile plumage, and bold enough even then to sit back on their legs and strike at me with their claws. To prevent them from straying farther I enclosed them in a barricade of sheaves—a kind of stockade with ample space inside. At one end of this I placed my hiding tent, covering it well with sheaves, all except the front, which contained an aperture for my camera lens and also an observation hole.

Realizing that the adults were shy, very timid, and suspicious, I built the hide substantially and camouflaged it as best I could, hoping that the birds would return eventually and face the lens; but there was a second factor which I had overlooked, and that was, I believe now, the birds' sense of smell.

The day following that when I built the hide I watched the birds go into this circle of sheaves and feed the young. They did not hesitate a moment, dropping straight down with food in the talons. I was watching from a distance, through field glasses, and by the time I was ready to enter the hide and begin photography I was convinced that they had become thoroughly accustomed to the sight of the hiding tent.

But over three days, no fewer than 26 hours did I spend in the cramped quarters of the hide, and from this long wait only two photographs of inferior quality were the reward.

The parent bird did no more than drop quickly into the enclosure, release the food it brought, and, without closing the wings, spring smartly into the air again. It was simply a 'touch-down' and nothing more. She (or he) was obviously

nervous, and her visits to the young ones were few—on the first day twice; the next morning she failed to come at all; on the third day, which was wet, she came three times, only, between 6 a.m. and 4 p.m.

My theory about the bird's sense of smell was formed by watching the behaviour of the young ones and the parent's attitude when I was not in the hide, but observing them from a distance, through glasses.

At one stage small pieces of raw meat, which I had brought to help maintain life in the young ones in the long intervals between the parents' visits, were thrown through my observation hole into the enclosure. The birds consumed all those in reach. One piece, however, fell down through the grain, out of sight, just in front of the hide and some four feet from where the young ones were sitting at the opposite end of the enclosure. About an hour later, one of these birds, evidently hungry, seemed to smell the piece of meat. I saw it raise its head as a dog does when 'sniffing the air.' It gave a few more stretches of the neck in the direction of the hide, then it walked to the spot, dug its beak down into the loose grain stalks, and retrieved the piece of meat.

This supposed sense of smell also was demonstrated in the adults, for whenever they did return with food—usually comprising the sanguineous entrails and flesh of a Noisy Miner (*Myzantha melanocephala*)—they veered off suddenly just before preparing to alight. Eventually, when they did alight, it was always with a wild eye and nervous attitude. Generally, only one foot touched the ground. The food was released from the other, held in the air, and the still outspread wings would come into action before I had time to operate the camera.

Yet, whenever I was not in the hide, the birds' whole attitude was different. There was obviously no fear, and the young would be attended to without hurry. Indeed, after one of the birds had spent some 30 minutes behind the barricade, I found she had been building a rough kind of nest for the young ones, having brought in a dead stick and some tall dead weeds and fashioned the oat stalks into the shape of a nest, in which the offspring were then sitting.

As I had taken every precaution to avoid frightening the birds, even to leaving an old lens affixed in the tent aperture to simulate the one I used, while I was absent, and having a second person accompany me to the hide and walk away after I was hidden, I have no hesitation in attributing this timidity to the bird's being able to detect my presence by smell while I was concealed in the hide. If that was the real reason, then the would-be photographer would have little means of countering the natural shyness of the bird and outwitting its suspicious nature. A facetious friend remarked that obviously I should use more water and soap!