



Nest of Western Warbler, near Maryborough, Vic.

Photo. by A. H. Chisholm.

## Some Birds of Central Victoria

By A. H. CHISHOLM, Melbourne, Vic.

Draw a line roughly across the western half of the map of Victoria—from Castlemaine, westward through Maryborough and Avoca, to Stawell and Ararat—and you will get, I think, the southern limit in eastern Australia of several species of birds. Governing factors, of course, are soil and vegetation: the country near and to the north of those towns is largely semi-dry open forest, dominated by ironbarks, box-trees, etc., whereas most of the country to west, south, and south-west, leading to Bass Strait, consists of grassy expanses, with trees relatively rare.

That remarkable vocalist of the interior, the Crested Bell-bird, used to be somewhat common in the Maryborough district (before cutters destroyed its cover) and a few pairs are still to be found there. Last year a nest with eggs, plus three caterpillars, was discovered on August 31, the earliest record of the kind I have ever known. Other dry-country birds on the Maryborough list are the Gilbert Whistler, the Chestnut-tailed Thornbill, and the Western Warbler. Moreover, in recent years the Blue-faced Honey-eater has become established in the town and district, and the mistletoe-loving honeyeater has become a more or less regular spring-summer visitor.

In October of last year the Maryborough list of distinctive inlanders was increased by the presence of a number of Black Honeyeaters (*Myzomela nigra*). I had the pleasure of photographing a pair of these dainty birds at their nest in scrub on the south-eastern outskirts of the town, and also of photographing, in another part of the town's fringes, a charming nest of the Western Warbler. In each case the breeding occurrence appears to be Victoria's farthest-south record for the species.

The Western Warbler (*Gerygone fusca*) was first seen near Maryborough in the spring of 1937. Its airy song, a compromise between the melodies of the White-throated and Mangrove Warblers, came to me then as an echo from long ago and far away, for I had last heard the fragile voice, nearly twenty years earlier, up in the central-west of Queensland. A nest was begun, but not completed, immediately west of Maryborough in 1941. The nest of 1946 (8 feet up in a eucalypt sapling) also failed to accommodate eggs: it was blown down by a high wind as soon as building operations were completed. Possibly, however, the birds succeeded in breeding later, for they were heard in the same area—near the Maryborough East State School—early in January of 1947.

Is the Western Warbler migratory? Perhaps so. Certainly the species is rare in Victoria at any time. But, being small and inconspicuous, the birds could easily be overlooked if they remained silent during the cooler months.

On the evening of October 29 (the day after the Warbler's nest had been photographed) I was watching Painted Honeyeaters and Mistletoe-birds, almost within sight of Maryborough's large railway station, when my attention was arrested by a plaintive piping emanating from an extensive patch of 'Chinese scrub' (*Cassinia arcuata*) in a paddock on the other side of the road. Rather like the mournful notes of the Little Grassbird, the calls might have been made—so I thought vaguely—by either insects or young birds. Investigation disclosed a small but lively bird that was certainly not young, and when a squeak brought it into a favourable position, in the fading light, it became revealed as a Black Honeyeater. The sight was mildly astonishing, not only because of the unexpected occurrence, but (as I thought on first meeting with the species, near Bendigo, ten years earlier) because the bird resembles the Scarlet Honeyeater in size and form and yet is very different in colour and voice. Habitats, too, are in striking contrast.

In the early morning of October 30 five male Black Honeyeaters were seen sitting on lookouts, six to eight feet aloft, in the scrubby expanse. Each one uttered, almost incessantly, the monotonous 'peeeee,' varied at times by a sparrow-like chirp and also by an animated chatter when it dived into the scrub, presumably in pursuit of a female. Other observations made on the birds agreed with notes already given in *The Emu*, during recent years, from districts farther north.

Having to return to Melbourne as October closed, I asked a local man interested in birds, Mr. Tom Hart, to keep watch. Four weeks later he reported that, after growing almost giddy through wandering in the thick scrub, he had found a Black Honeyeater's nest with two eggs. I saw the nest on December 7. A frail structure, two feet six inches from the ground in the fork of a small dry wattle well within the scrub, it then contained two new-born, sightless young, black with tufts of white fluff. Both adults fed the babes, but the female was much the tamer of the two. That was the only nest found, although elsewhere in the scrub I saw two fledgelings flying—and also inspected nests of the Mistletoe-bird, Red-capped Robin, and Rufous Whistler. When the area was re-visited on January 1 (1947) not one of the Black Honeyeaters was to be seen.

Incidentally, the close-growing shrubs amongst which the pretty wanderers were found are not, as is often supposed, introduced plants, but natives. The drooping cassinia of botanists, the species has become 'Chinese scrub' because it grows mainly in sludgy areas where Chinese fossickers used to work. Why do the curious little Honeyeaters favour such areas? Is it that the odour of the plants attracts particular insects upon which they feed? And, for another question, how did the birds contrive to find their way over a con-

siderable area of forest country, presumably for the first time, to an isolated patch of the scrub on the fringe of the southern plains?

## Geographic Variation in the Reed-Warbler \*

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The second edition of the R.A.O.U. *Official Checklist* (1926) leaves it undecided which races of the Reed-Warbler should be recognized. A number of papers (by Hartert, Rand, Rensch, Salomonsen, and Stresemann) have appeared on the geographical variation of the Reed-Warbler in the Australasian area since that time. However, the results of such studies were frequently conflicting, and with the splendid material recently collected by Coultas and Rand it is possible to arrive at a more definite classification.

Hartert (1924, *Treubia*, vol. 6, pp. 20-23) showed that *Acrocephalus australis* is nothing but a race of the widespread *A. stentoreus*. Salomonsen (1929, *Jour. Ornith.*, Suppl., vol. 1, pp. 266-281) went even further and united both 'species' with *A. arundinaceus*. Even though the forms *A. arundinaceus sarudnyi* and *A. 'stentoreus' brunnescens* do not intergrade where they approach each other geographically, their ranges do not seem to overlap, and it therefore seems justified to consider them as conspecific. This arrangement simplifies the classification of the genus and has been adopted by all recent workers.

The study of this species is impeded by the fact that many of the specimens in collections are poorly sexed, which is a great handicap in view of the striking size difference between males and females. Singing males are the principal target of collectors, and no females at all seem to be available from many localities. Size and, in particular, the proportion of wing to bill length, seems one of the best taxonomic characters in this species with but little geographic variation in colour. The relative and absolute size of the bill decreases with latitude (Allen's rule); that of the wing increases with latitude (Bergmann's rule). This is rather well demonstrated in the dimensions of 75 specimens from 11 populations (see diagram). Taxonomically this diagram can be interpreted (in conjunction with the colour characters of the Western Australian birds) to support the recognition of four subspecies. The various populations from the tropical parts of the Australian region overlap too widely to be separated subspecifically. They are united under the name *cervinus*. The populations from the Arfak Mountains and

\*Notes on Australian Birds, III. For earlier parts see *Emu*, vol. 40, August, 1940, pp. 111-117; and *Emu*, vol. 43, July, 1943, pp. 3-17.