

Avocets are insatiable feeders, often feeding with the head under water. Usually they are silent as they feed or stand and preen, and a few sharp notes may be a prelude to flight. As with other water birds Avocets feed with the head into the wind.

What was to be a final visit was made on Saturday, September 27. It was a very windy day but warm. As we approached a bird was seen to leave the nest, or at least the bank in the vicinity. It came back soon but would not go to the nest while the camera was in position. On one occasion both birds alighted between the camera and the hide tent and ran towards the latter, stopping at about ten feet away and then rising. That was the nearest that either came to returning to the eggs. We had expected that by this date the eggs would have hatched, but, as they were not, we made another visit on October 4 but again without photographic success.

Observations during this series of visits confirmed all characteristics noted and recorded in the previous paper. In particular the casual nature of the brooding, even during cold and wet weather and apart from suspicions aroused by the proximity of a camera, were established.

During visits paid during late summer and early autumn, 1948, no sign of Avocets was seen. In July and early August there were fifteen birds, associating with White-headed Stilts. I was later advised that visits in September disclosed no Avocets present.

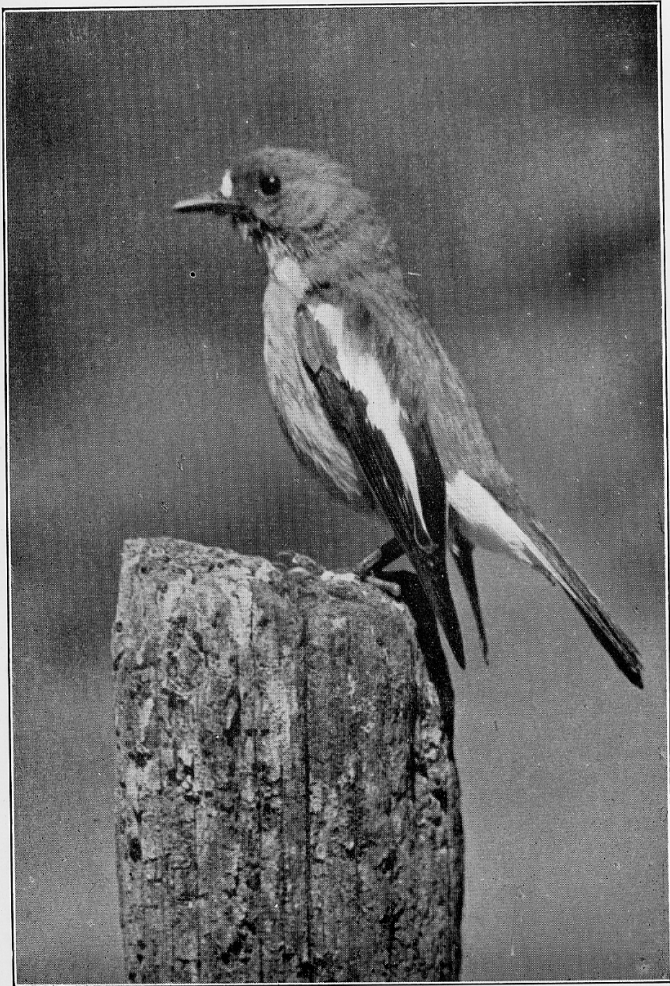
Watching Stations and Their Uses

By MICHAEL SHARLAND, Hobart, Tas.

Many birds have observation posts where they perch to keep an eye on breeding territory, to observe the movements of predators, other forms of enemies, and rivals, and to detect movements which indicate the presence of food. These 'watching stations' are possessed by several different kinds of birds, and the process of watching is an important feature in the daily activity of the average wild bird.

Although most birds use observation posts for some purpose or other throughout the year, it is during breeding that we find 'watching' indulged in to the greatest extent. Nearly every male bird has its particular watching station within the boundaries of its nesting territory. The bird is seen perched on some elevated point at frequent intervals, possibly to call or sing, to challenge a rival, to indicate its mastery of a particular domain, or merely to preen its plumage and rest.

More often the watching has a utilitarian purpose. If the territory be extensive and include bush and grass lands, it is able from its perch to see all that goes on within the



Flame Robin at 'watching station',

Photo. by M. S. R. Sharland.

boundaries and some distance beyond and to take any action which may be necessary, to protect itself, its nesting mate, or safeguard its territory.

A watching station is essential in the gathering of food. The insectivorous bird watches for the grasshopper, worm or grub, the bird of prey for the rabbit or mouse or for another bird. And sometimes the lookout post is used by a bird which presumably has been assigned the task of being a sentinel for others of its kind feeding on the ground.

Watching stations are of several kinds. They are not always high above the earth. The altitude depends on the particular habits of the bird and the special environment in which it breeds or feeds. One species may select a tall dead tree, another a telegraph pole, another a high branch of a living tree, a cliff top or rock. With some, a knoll in a field, a fence post, or even a clump of earth, will suffice, provided they afford a clear view of the immediate landscape.

Within its nesting territory a single male bird may possess more than one watching station, though generally there is one more favoured than others.

In birds that hunt their prey, 'watching' is an important aspect of the life pattern, and the type of watching station varies according to the nature of the hunter. The lookout selected by the Goshawk (*Astur fasciatus*), and also the Black-cheeked Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), is usually one that affords some opportunity for self-effacement, such as the branch of a living tree whence the birds are better able to take their victims on the wing largely by surprise, combined, in the case of the Falcon, with speed of flight. The lookout station of the Swamp-Harrier (*Circus approximans*) is often a fence post in a marsh, but this position is no great aid in revealing food, for the bird's victims are mostly concealed in the reeds and need to be hunted.

Best known of the hawks which have these watching stations—in Tasmania at any rate—is the Brown Hawk (*Falco berigora*). Common in the Midlands and through the northern part of the State, it shows a decided preference for telegraph poles. These, in fact, are its favourite watching points, although it also uses dead branches whence to inspect the surrounding country for young rabbits and birds.

Along railway lines and roads it has become so accustomed to passing traffic that it often refuses to be dislodged from its perch, giving train or car a disdainful stare. If the Brown Hawk is not swift enough to catch a rabbit before it darts for a burrow or pick up a bandicoot before it dodges beneath a log, it can always make a meal from lizards or grasshoppers—on which it has more than once been seen feeding.

The spired tip of a pine tree in my home garden is the watching station of a Yellow-winged Honeyeater (*Meliornis novæ-hollandiæ*). It consistently perches there during the breeding season, when its mate is brooding on a nest in the shrubberies. The male, in fact, seems to spend the best part of its time perched on this tree-top, watching for rivals which it pursues with great vigour, and, with considerable dexterity, darting out to capture flies on the wing and returning to the perch to call loudly and preen its plumage. The common Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) often challenges it for the right to use this high vantage point, but the Honeyeater usually wins in the end.

This is the bird's favourite perch, but it has a second one on a dead pine twig in another corner of the garden, and a third on the tip of a wattle tree in a lower corner, so the boundaries of the garden are also those of the bird's territory, into which no other Yellow-winged Honeyeater may venture without risking the owner's displeasure.

In the country, stones and clods of earth are the lookout points for the Flame Robin (*Petroica phoenicea*), which also rises to the lower branches of wattles and oaks the better to view the grass for the movement of caterpillars.

One can often notice the Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*) perched consistently on the high part of a gum tree and calling. We might more appropriately describe its perch as a 'singing station'. Likewise, the stake in a marsh, an old fence post, or the tip of a briar bush, becomes the singing station of the Field-Wren (*Calamanthus fuliginosus*) the melody of which is heard from many a boggy flat, marsh, and wet tussock area throughout Tasmania.

The Bronze-Cuckoo (*Chalcites basalis*) trills its plaintive call from a dead stick often high in a living tree; the Striated Diamond-Bird (*Pardalotus striatus*) is just as vehement calling from a sapling twig close to a nesting hole. A tall clump of reeds is the lookout station of the Swamp-hen (*Porphyrio melanotus*), a crag the watching post of the Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaëtus audax*).

Ravens Feeding on Boxthorn Berries.—The Australian Raven (*Corvus coronoides*) is a common bird on the plains west and south-west of Melbourne, and great numbers roost at night in the belts of sugar gums planted in those areas. On March 14, 1948, near Point Cook, under one of these rows of trees, I noted that the ground was strewn with pellets of small seeds interspersed with bright red berry skins. On examination the pellets were found to be composed of the seeds and skins of the berries of the African boxthorn, which grows abundantly in this district. I have often seen Ravens on the clumps and rows of boxthorn, and it appears that the ripe berries are relished by them.

—ROY WHEELER, Windsor, Vic., 28/10/48.