

## Birds and Caterpillars

By E. A. R. LORD, Murphy's Creek, Queensland

During March of 1955 the Murphy's Creek district, like many other places in the coastal and semi-coastal areas of south-east Queensland, was invaded by swarms of small whitish moths. These moths left behind them an exceptionally bad infestation of caterpillars which left large patches of grassland completely bare and, after feeding during the night hours, retreated into the ground, leaving small mounds of soil like the nests of small black ants, thickly covering the ground in the areas that were attacked. Each night these caterpillars came forth to feed when they were immune from attack from diurnal birds. This protection was of little aid to them as they were discovered, first by Magpies, then by Starlings, Crows, Currawongs and many other birds, including Black-faced and Ground Cuckoo-Shrikes, Noisy Miners, Magpie-Larks and even the Wagtail and Jacky Winter. Naturally the larger birds were the most consistent workers.

On April 8 a flock of more than forty Black-backed Magpies was observed working a heavily-infested patch of ground, digging out the caterpillars with their bills. These birds worked that area for three weeks, from dawn to dusk, and each day they must have consumed huge numbers of the fat, juicy grubs.

At that time Crows and Currawongs showed little interest, though they were plentiful in the area. By April 15 the Magpies had increased to from fifty to sixty birds. Magpie-Larks began to gather in numbers, soon reaching in the vicinity of 100 birds, all working the infested grounds.

The great gathering of birds naturally attracted hawks, and when one of those birds appeared there was a 'stampede' of the feeding birds, all rapidly taking to the air. A few Starlings had begun to join in the feast, as did the other smaller birds mentioned.

On April 17 a large flock of perhaps three hundred Starlings had arrived, probably from the western side of the Dividing Range as local Starlings were only in small parties until that time. Crows, too, had by now taken an active part in the work and their numbers were fast increasing, and a few Currawongs became interested, but not to the extent that the other birds were.

On April 23 all these birds were seeking fresh ground as the earlier-worked places were cleaned of the caterpillars. It was not necessary for them to go far afield as there were new feeding grounds close at hand.

Magpies had by now increased to well over 100 birds, and Magpie-Larks were of about equal number. By April 26 many Kookaburras joined in the good work and could be seen industriously digging out the caterpillars.

Butcher-birds, both Pied and Grey, began to assist, but their numbers were not great. Crows gathered in groups of from twenty to forty birds and effected good work. Spur-winged Plovers became more active, both by day and by night, and though only about ten birds were to be seen they must have accounted for a large quantity of caterpillars. It was strange that ibises had been totally absent from the district. Several pairs of White-faced Herons were working well.

The good work continued until May 3, by which time all infested ground had been thoroughly worked and apparently cleaned of the caterpillar pest. From that date onwards neither grub nor moth were seen and the bare ground was soon under a new coat of grass, the result of good rains and an extremely mild season.

On April 28 there was a most wonderful sight to behold. Starlings, Magpies and all the other birds mentioned were diligently at work when a Goshawk came on the scene. Magpies took to the air from many places and one flock of about thirty birds flew south until out of sight. All other birds scattered and mounted into the air above the hawk, but the starlings, which had reached very large numbers, remained in one huge flock at first. There must have been two thousand or more of these birds. The whole flock kept circling above the hawk which was desperately trying to rise above them.

This action seemed to confuse the Goshawk which seemed undecided which flock to attack. Then as it dived among the birds the whole mass came together again, leaving the hawk below as they rose very rapidly and circled above it.

This remarkable performance was repeated many times until the hawk abandoned the chase and glided down to some trees by the creek. The Starlings circled in massed formation for several minutes then came earthwards with a whirlwind roar and divided into many flocks which went in groups to the shelter of trees at their feeding ground and commenced their usual chattering calls commonly used while resting—calls which in volume of sound almost equalled that of the whirlwind sound of their wings while in the air.

---

**Birds Attacking Sparrow.**—We have often remarked on the absence of Sparrows on my father's farm in Yannathan, Gippsland. A small party of birds might appear, but after a day or so they are gone. Last week (February, 1956), my father saw a Sparrow moving about. As he watched it, a Noisy Miner and a Grey Butcher-bird both attacked it. They struck it repeatedly and apparently successfully, as my father found a Sparrow's wing on the drive next morning. No wonder there are no Sparrows on the farm if the Noisy Miners combine with the Butcher-birds to destroy them.—MARGARET MCKENZIE, Yarraville, Vic., 11/2/56.