



Dusky Wood-Swallows clustering

Flashlight photo. by M. S. R. Sharland

Clustering of Wood-Swallows

By K. A. HINDWOOD, Sydney, N.S.W.

The habit of Dusky Wood-Swallows (*Artamus cyanopterus*) of clustering together at night, and occasionally during the day, is well known. Various writers from the time of John Gould to the present day have stated that the birds hang together in clusters from the bole or branch of a tree, like a swarm of bees; that they assemble about hollow spouts in lofty trees or that they form a bunch near the ground, hanging on to each other, but usually head uppermost. The number of birds forming a cluster may vary from a few to as many as two hundred. In one of the registers of specimens in the Australian Museum, Sydney, is a notation to the effect that a Dusky Wood-Swallow was one of 27 shot while hanging in a cluster of over 100 in a dead tree at dusk. The locality was southern New South Wales and the date March 1901.

It may be doubted that the birds actually hang on to each other, and remain so throughout the night. It seems to me that they are more likely to cling individually to the rough bark of upright or sloping branches, or the main trunks of trees, no matter how tightly they are packed or clustered together.

Edith Coleman's observations on the subject, as published in the *Victorian Naturalist* (1944), are of such interest that they merit quoting in detail—

On 26th February 1944, at 8 p.m., my daughter called me to see a cluster of wood-swallows in one of our gum trees at Blackburn. Like a swarm of great bees they clung, almost encircling the stem, where three forks meet at about 15 feet from the ground. There must have been 80 or more in the swarm judging by the number of bills or tails I managed to count.

They suggested a pill-box bristling with guns or a nightmare cluster of saw-fly larvae. Some were head up, others head down, while the rest clung horizontally or at varying angles, so that tails and wings protruded like spines of an echidna. When motionless they resembled a dense mass of mussels clinging to the pile of a pier. For a time there was much 'talking' and fidgeting as they pushed in and out of the cluster, each seeming to seek a cosy spot, although the evening was warm and sultry. When one fell out of the swarm it merely clutched the bark 2 or 3 feet below and clambered back instead of flying, while all the rest made encouraging little sounds. At about 8.30 p.m., a magpie flew into and dispersed the cluster. We did not see them re-assemble again that evening.

Next evening they clustered again in the same place at the same time, and remained all night. As there were no droppings on the ground it was obvious that faeces were retained during the period of clustering. We left for Sorrento on February 28th, but my husband noticed the swarm in the same tree for another week.

Mrs. Coleman discussed the subject again in 1945, 1947 and 1948, and published a drawing showing the formation of a cluster. The attitudes of the numerous birds shown in

the sketch indicate that they were clinging individually to the tree in very close formation.

The general effect of the cluster is similar to that in the photograph accompanying these notes, except that none of the five birds (four adults and one immature bird) is hanging head downward. The photograph was taken at 9 p.m. on November 13, 1955, at Manobalai, Upper Hunter Valley, N.S.W. The weather was mild though windy, and the situation chosen by the birds about seven feet from the ground on the slightly-leaning trunk of a tree with very rough bark, was exposed to the south. A photograph taken the following night showed four birds only and they were about a foot from their roosting-place of the previous night. The immature bird was again at the head of the cluster.

Normally the birds would have their heads tucked under their wings or against the bodies of their companions for the night. In the photograph they are shown looking towards the camera, having been disturbed by the movements of the photographer, Michael Sharland.

It may be noted that in his book of 1929, *Birds and Green Places*, A. H. Chisholm has a chapter entitled 'The Swarming of the Swallows', in which he described two examples of clustering by Dusky Wood-Swallows which he saw in Queensland and New South Wales, respectively. In the Queensland instance, which involved some thirty birds, several of the late-comers are said to have edged in from above and clung head downwards.

Mr. Chisholm has lately told me that he had some discussion on the subject in the *Brisbane Daily Mail* in 1922, and that one of his contributors, C. H. Jerrard, stated that he had once seen, in a clump of mistletoe, a cluster of Dusky Wood-Swallows that contained approximately 200 birds. Mr. Chisholm adds that he has been told of Rainbow-birds (*Merops ornatus*) clustering at dusk among the leaves of pendulous branches, and that he himself has seen White-browed Wood-Swallows acting similarly. He thinks it probable that all members of the genus *Artamus* cluster at times, though the habit is most confirmed in the Dusky Wood-Swallow. The practice, he suggests, is mainly followed in the non-breeding season, but may occasionally take place, on a small scale, even when the birds are nesting.

REFERENCES

- 1929 Chisholm, A. H. *Birds and Green Places*, p. 59.
- 1944 Coleman, Edith. *Victorian Naturalist*, vol. 61, June, p. 44.
- 1945 *ibid.*, vol. 61, April, p. 218.
- 1947 *ibid.*, vol. 64, June, p. 28.
- 1948 *ibid.*, vol. 64, April, p. 230.