

Nesting of the Blue-faced Honeyeater

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During the past few years, while residing at Inverramsay, 16 miles east of Allora, Queensland, I paid particular attention to a local pair of Blue-faced Honeyeaters (*Entomyzon cyanotis*).

Inverramsay is at the head of Goomburra Valley and is walled-in by high ranges. Through this valley winds the picturesque Dalrymple Creek. The trees consist of yellow box and red gum, with white gum towards the Great Dividing Range, and with *Casuarina* and willows along the creek. Angophoras and stringybark are found on the ridges, and are replaced by jungle at the head of the valley on the Main Range. Dairying is the main industry, and therefore most of the land in the valley bed is cultivated.

During the few years that I have been recording the habits of local birds, I have seen the one pair of Blue-faced Honeyeaters raise no less than 10 broods. In each instance an unusual feature was that the birds themselves built the nest. Not once did they adopt a disused nest of any other species, as is so often the case with the Blue-faced Honeyeater.

There were several other pairs of *Entomyzon* resident in the district, each pair being approximately one mile apart. I never located the nests of these birds, mainly due to lack of time, but I should think that they too would build their own nests, unless they adopted the nests of the larger honeyeaters, orioles or magpie-larks. Strangely enough, this district lacks the Grey-crowned Babbler (*Pomatostomus temporalis*), whose nest is favoured by the Blue-face in other areas. Only one pair of babblers was known in the valley and they inhabited the drier range to the south, out of the honeyeaters' territory.

In fact, from Toowoomba to Killarney, I have never seen babblers close to the range. The closest I have seen them in the Allora district (except for the local pair) was 10 miles west of Allora, approximately 35 miles west of the range. I found the birds in moderate numbers around Warwick, this being approximately 30 miles from the Great Dividing Range. However, E. A. R. Lord of Murphy's Creek states that the babblers are plentiful in his district, and that their old nests are used by the Blue-faced Honeyeater. (Murphy's Creek is situated at the foot of the range, on the eastern side, and a few miles north-east of Toowoomba. Perhaps, if the babblers inhabited the Inverramsay district, their disused nests would also be adopted by *Entomyzon*.)

The typical nest built by the Blue-faced Honeyeaters is a rather small, deep, thick-walled, cup-shaped structure. It is placed in a fork in the main trunk of a tree, usually at about 30 feet, but sometimes higher. The structure is firmly

wedged into the fork. Occasionally the birds build in a fork formed by a branch growing from the main trunk of the tree. I have seen nests in both yellow box and white gums, but there is a decided preference for the latter. The branches of the white gums are more vertical than those of the yellow box; this makes the actual fork narrower, and therefore more adaptable for nest-building. In the more open forks of the box trees the nests seem to be merely "sitting" there, whereas in the narrower forks of the white gums they are built solidly into the fork, and so have less chance of being blown down during storms. One nest built into the fork of a white gum had a base 10 inches in length and gave the impression of a wedge.

The actual nest is built of rootlets of a wiry type: *paspalum* rootlets, pieces of dry, soft grass-blades, pieces of soft bark, *paspalum* stems, and other grass-stems. Approximately 75 per cent. of all material used consists of rootlets. The egg-cavity is lined with very fine rootlets and grasses, with a thin pad of plant-down. Indeed, the birds build very substantially, which seems strange in the case of a species which so seldom makes a nest of its own. The only "criticism" that need be offered is that the structure is externally untidy.

The diameter of the egg-cavity is 4 inches, and the depth $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The external diameter, measured across the top of the cavity, is usually 6 inches. This gives some idea of the thickness of the walls of the nest. The total length varies according to the depth of the fork in which it is placed, but on an average it would be approximately 7 inches. Often, the nest is decorated with a few pieces of green spider-silk, placed on the outside, just below the rim. Viewed from the ground, the nest suggests the flood débris that is often seen hanging on a fence after being washed from a grassy paddock. The birds built this type of nest on all occasions but one.

After losing the clutch of two eggs from one nest to a Kookaburra, the Blue-faces moved to a small gully running into the creek, some 300 yards from the former site. A few days later they began building a nest in an angophora sapling. The nest was situated 15 feet up at the top of the sapling and was supported at the sides by a few upright twigs. The egg-cavity was larger than that of nests built into the thick fork of a gum-tree. In this case, the cavity was $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in depth. The external diameter at the top of the nest was $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches, suggesting a thinner-walled structure than with former nests. The same materials were used except that grass-stems predominated, whereas rootlets were mainly used in the gum-tree structures. The nest suggested that of the Noisy Friar-bird, the main difference being that it was supported by the sides and not by the rim. Also, it was rather shallower.

This nest was built entirely by the pair of Blue-faces. I saw them, several times, taking material from the old nest to the new site. It appears that individual birds can build more than one type of nest, though a particular type may be preferred. Possibly this pair was hatched locally. Could it have been that one of them was hatched from a nest built into the thick fork of a gum-tree and the other from a type similar to that of the Noisy Friar-bird, supported by a few twigs in the top foliage of a sapling?

If the Blue-faces lose a clutch of eggs to a predator, they will rebuild a few hundred yards away. I have noticed this on two occasions after their eggs were taken by Kookaburras, and, on one occasion, when the nest was blown from a thick fork in a box tree. The material from the old nest is shifted to the new nest until the supply is exhausted, or until the new nest is completed. This, no doubt, is the easiest and quickest method of obtaining material. It takes the birds about 10 days to rebuild the nest and lay a second clutch of eggs. The shortest period in which I have seen eggs in a nest after the loss of a clutch was seven days.

Kookaburras and goannas (*Varanus* spp.) seem to be the birds' main enemies. The habit of building beside the main trunk, or in the fork of a main trunk of a tree, makes their eggs an easy prey for goannas. These reptiles ascend the main trunk of the tree but I have never seen one on a branch at any distance from the bole, unless it be fairly thick.

Two eggs seem to be the clutch for the Blue-face. Other clutches I have seen in babblers' nests (near Warwick) have numbered two, except on one occasion, when three eggs were found, one of which proved to be infertile.

Double-banded Dotterel's unusual behaviour.—While walking near the mouth of the Bream Creek, near Torquay, Victoria, on February 27, 1960, two Double-banded Dotterels (*Charadrius bicinctus*) were observed near the water's edge. One bird appeared restless, and on my approach it ran to what appeared to be another bird lying on the sand just above high-water mark. Spreading its wings, it commenced a series of fluttering movements, with occasional pecking at the prostrate bird. After four or five minutes a closer approach was made, when the bird ceased fluttering and attempted to carry the other bird away, but only managed to move it a few inches.

On examination, the dead bird was identified as *Charadrius bicinctus*, and had been dead only a few minutes. It was in good condition and there was no external evidence of injury. It was forwarded to the National Museum, Melbourne.—J. R. WHEELER, Belmont, Vic., 15/6/60.