

The Crested Bell-Bird

By AMY BAESJON, Balladonia, *via* Norseman, W.A.

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The home of the Crested Bell-bird (*Orcoica gutturalis*) is in saltbush and lightly timbered country of the Eucla district of Western Australia, near Balladonia, about a hundred miles north of Israelite Bay, between two and three hundred miles south of east from the Gold Fields, and three hundred miles from the South Australian Border at Eucla.

These Bell-birds build in September and November, and make their nests either in young gumtrees or in the tops of hollow stumps—usually no more than four feet from the ground. The outer part of the nest, when built in trees, is composed of small sticks, and lined with bark from dead trees. In the case of stumps, however, the nest is made entirely of bark. As the eggs are laid, the birds gather a number of hairy caterpillars and carefully pinch them up and down with their beaks. They do not kill them, however, and the caterpillars sometimes begin to crawl away, whereupon the birds often catch them again and indignantly poke them into the cracks of the stump. The only soft lining the nest has is the "hair" which is rubbed off the caterpillars.

When the young ones come out—a fortnight after the eggs are laid—they are fed upon the caterpillars which are in the nest, and from then on the parent birds are kept busy. I was able to watch this pair of birds fairly closely. At first they were both very shy, but after the chicks came out, the male bird took very little notice of me. His mate, though, came near the nest only once, and though her bill was full of caterpillars, she flew away the instant she caught sight of me; I never saw her at close quarters again. She used to gather the caterpillars (this pair did not seem to feed their chicks

on anything else), and hand them over to her mate, who would bring them to the chicks. He always approached the nest and always left it in precisely the same way. The nest was beside the road, and there was a small burnt patch of ground about fifty yards away, where the birds gathered most of the caterpillars. He would drop to the ground on the opposite side of the road, hop across to the foot of the stump, scolding with his "Tut-tut-tut!" the whole time. Then he would hop from branch to branch of the few suckers which grew around the stump, always choosing the same branches, and finally into the nest, where he fed his chicks. Then he always flew to the same dead stick about four yards away, where he would sit and preen his feathers for a while, and then fly off in search of more caterpillars. He was very regular, feeding his chicks about every twelve minutes.

One day, a large black lizard heard the young Bellbirds, and soon made his way to the foot of the stump. Just as I was about to rescue the chicks, the Bell-bird returned, and growled, "Tut-tut-tut." Whereupon the lizard retired beneath a fallen log. The Bell-bird fed his chicks, then made his way to the lizard, and, putting up his crest to its highest and ruffling all his feathers till he looked a perfect ball of fury, he pecked at the lizard, and gave him such a bad time that the lizard found it was all he could do to gain the shelter of a hollow tree some yards off. Then the Bell-bird flew to the highest point of a dead tree near me, and it was then, for the first time, that I discovered what he really was, namely, a Bell-bird. For up to then I had never seen a Bell-bird—though their beautiful song is familiar enough. He began to sing now—very softly, deep and low; then he gradually got louder and louder, and his bill opened wider and wider, and his throat trembled, as though it was an effort to produce this wonderful sound. But it is the accompanying sound which seemed to come from further down his throat, as it were, that was most beautiful, and most bell-like. The whole song was certainly one of the most beautiful I have ever heard. When he reached the limit of his loud notes, he stopped, and began again on the soft notes. From the distance, this day, his mate answered him, and she seemed to have as sweet a voice as he.

When the young ones first came out they were covered with brown down, about as scant as the hair upon the caterpillars they fed upon. In two days pin-feathers appeared, and a few days after they were covered with brown feathers. In a few more days they flew away—a little over a week from the time they were hatched. As I have noticed with all the wild birds of this part, the parent birds take their chicks right away from the nest as soon as they are able to fly, though they continue to feed them for some time.