

## A Curious Habit of the White-Eared Honeyeater

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The remarks of Mr. Walter H. Crowe in *The Emu* (Vol. XXIX, Part 1, pp. 72, 73) recording the incident of a White-eared Honeyeater (*Meliphaga leucotis*) alighting on his wife's head and removing hair is not without parallel, but seems to indicate a fixed habit common to the species.

Previous records, and there are many, are mostly from the neighbourhood of Sydney. The earliest appearing in *The Emu* is given by Dr. E. A. D'Ombain (Vol. XVII., pp. 155, 156), who remarks that in August, 1917, a White-eared Honeyeater alighted on his clothes and head and commenced to remove material. Dr. D'Ombain also mentions that a similar experience once befell a colleague of his. On various occasions the "Outdoor Australia" columns of the *Sydney Mail* have contained notes relative to this singular habit of the White-eared Honeyeater.

My own experiences with this attractive bird are interesting and not a little amusing. While watching the shy Chestnut-tailed Ground-Wren (*Hylacola pyrrhopygia*) at Middle Harbour, near Sydney, in 1928, I was surprised to see a White-eared Honeyeater perch within a few feet of me. How great then was my astonishment when it flew to my head, where it vigorously attempted to remove some hair. My two companions who were nearby displaced their hats and "White-ear" visited them both. Meanwhile, I hastily removed my socks, placing them upon my head, and on returning to me the bird, a female, was able to obtain the much-sought-for nesting material.

During August of this year I visited the same area, and again experienced the pleasure of having a wild bird alight not only on my head, but also on my arms, body and legs. The same thing occurred a week later, when I was unwittingly the cause of a quarrel between two pairs of the birds. It appears that the female, on such occasions, always calls the male, who, though obviously curious and probably somewhat alarmed, prefers the role of an interested on-looker. In endeavouring to ascertain the boldness of the female bird, I walked slowly away; she remained on my head—an increase in speed caused her to fly to a nearby sapling and then follow closely behind me protesting in a voice, which, in tone, was very much like the cry of a petulant child. The moment I stopped she unhesitatingly flew to my body or head.

Without knowing it I had wandered in to the territory of another pair of White-eared Honeyeaters. The male of

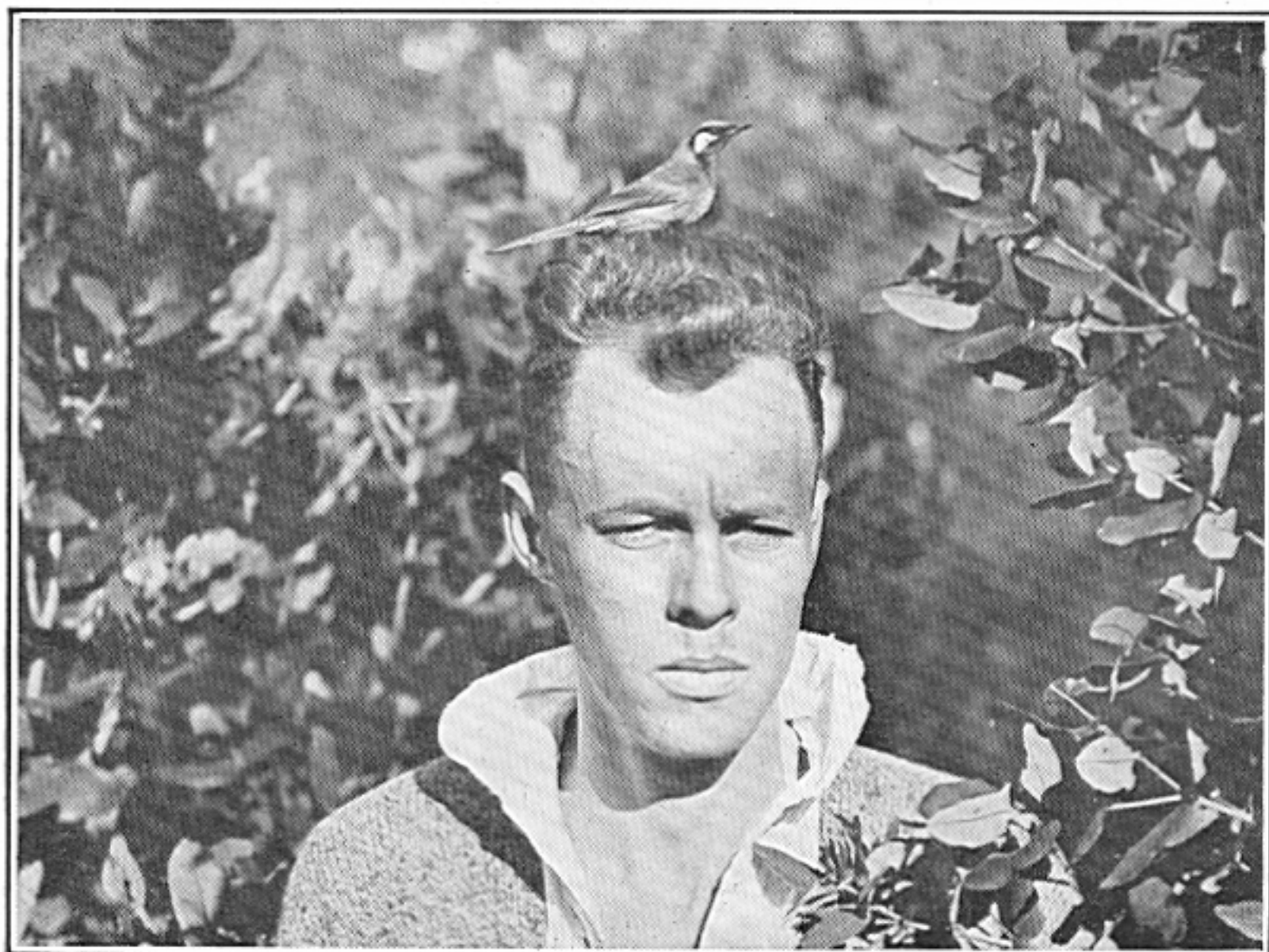
the second pair, with outstretched wings and tail and snapping bill attacked the consort of the female on my head, but, on seeing her he retired from the combat to chase her away, returning immediately to his adversary who seemed unwilling to desert his spouse.

Four times I laughingly witnessed this comedy; meanwhile the female of the second pair, which was apparently building, for she had a feather in her bill, watched nearby, but did not attempt to perch on my body. I returned to the territory of the first pair of birds. Focussing the camera on a certain position and attaching a string to the shutter I was able to secure several photographs of the bird perched on my head, all of which, excepting the one reproduced, showed movement.

A few weeks prior to the above incident, Mr. Norman Chaffer, of Roseville, obtained several photographs of another White-eared Honeyeater perched on Mrs. Chaffer's head, whilst later I photographed a bird on Mr. Chaffer's shoulder; also this bird (the one I had previously photographed on my head) was taken removing strands from a coil of rope. When such unusual happenings as quoted above are recorded at intervals covering a number of years and from widely separated localities, it is apparent that a powerful instinct, inherent in the species, causes the female bird to be so fearless, during nidification, in her search for wool or fur, with which the delightfully woven, cup-shaped nest is usually lined.

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**"Jacky Winter" and the Screen.** — Amongst a dozen or more species whose domestic routine was disturbed last season by the advent of a large and noisy cinema camera the Brown Flycatcher or Jacky Winter (*Microeca fascians*) stood out conspicuously as the most indifferent to the conditions imposed by this class of photography. The noise caused by the operation of a cinema camera is very considerable, and it becomes necessary usually to use various ruses and specially constructed apparatus before the subject will act naturally. A pair of these Flycatchers whose nest was discovered at Beaconsfield treated the camera with lofty disdain and, within five minutes of its erection, visited the nest quite freely. Eventually the camera was moved up until the lens was within eleven inches of the female bird and she continued to sit placidly on the nest whilst the camera roared.—R. T. LITTLEJOHNS, R.A.O.U., Melbourne.



White-eared Honeyeater seeking nesting material.

Photo. by K. A. Hindwood, R.A.O.U.



Brown Flycatcher (Jacky Winter) on nest.

Photo. by R. T. Littlejohns, R.A.O.U.