



The Little Friar-bird (*Philemon citreogularis*). Upper, juvenile.

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The Little Friar-bird—*Philemon citreogularis*

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This species was first described by Gould, in 1836, under the name of *Tropidorhynchus citreogularis*, from an immature specimen taken in the interior of New South Wales. The specific name refers to the yellow colouring of the throat, distinct in immature specimens, but non-existent in adults. Gould himself later pointed out the fact that this specific name was erroneously applied. In 1848 he described a new form under the name of *T. sordidus* which "inhabits the Cobourg Peninsula, and is precisely similar to *T. citreogularis*, but is smaller in all its admeasurements except in the bill, which is more developed." It would appear, however, that there is no definite dividing line which can be drawn between the two forms, the birds merely conforming to the general rule for Australian birds that specimens of any widely-spread species collected in the northern portion of the continent are smaller than those from southern Australia.

This bird, in its various forms, occurs in Australia in every mainland State, but not in Tasmania. It is a bird of the open forest lands, and, in favourable situations, is common in the inland areas of the Northern Territory, north-west Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, and less plentiful in South Australia. In New South Wales and Victoria occurrences on the seaward side of the Dividing Range are unusual and probably only occur during severe droughts or following strong winds in certain definite directions. In north-west Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland the bird is common on the coast as well as inland.

Although largely a bird of the inland areas, it is not a dry country form, being confined, over its habitat, to those locations where water is readily accessible, usually nesting near dams or watercourses, the nest frequently overhanging the water. Keartland, writing of this species in north-west Australia (*North, Nest and Eggs*, vol. II, p. 173), says:

In the neighbourhood of the Fitzroy River, and especially at Derby, these birds were very numerous. They seemed to require water as frequently as Finches and Pigeons, and dearly love a bath. Often, whilst watching the different birds arriving and departing from the water troughs, I was amazed by the visit of one or more of these birds, whose sudden arrival caused the immediate dispersal of all other species from the water. It is very pugnacious and chases any intruders from the vicinity of its nest. Should an Owl be disturbed during the day, it is immediately noticed by a Friar-bird, and chased and worried for a great distance, during which time many other birds join in the hunt. Many of their nests were found near the river, but only two eggs obtained. The nests were made of coarse grass, cup-shaped, and placed in the drooping foliage of Eucalypts. When seen from below, they bore a strong resemblance to those of the Chestnut-eared Finch.

In November and December, 1930, I observed numbers of birds of this species in several places along the east coast of Queensland. In November, 1933, I was in Rockhampton, where, in a paddock containing scattered timber, I located a pair of these birds. They were extremely pugnacious, viciously attacking a pair of Black-backed Magpies and a Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike which had nests in nearby trees. In attacking these birds they appeared to be using a certain tree as a base, and after watching for some time I saw one bird, apparently the female, return to the nest, which was concealed in a thick growth of young shoots in the centre of the tree.

On my approaching the tree, the sitting bird left the nest and, together with her mate, commenced to swoop viciously at me, increasing the ferocity of their attacks as I climbed to the nest. I was unable to climb to a position where I could be right above the nest in order to look into it, so, placing myself as close to the nest as possible, I felt inside it and found it to contain two eggs. Removing one of the eggs, I was amazed to find it about twice as large as the normal egg of the Little Friar-bird and could only conclude that I was mistaken in my identification, and that the birds were of another species—obviously a Friar-bird—unknown to me. It was only after removing the second egg and finding it a typical one of the Little Friar-bird that I finally realized that the first egg was that of the Koel (*Eudynamis orientalis*). The Little and other Friar-birds are the common hosts of this Cuckoo in the habitat of the latter; in southern Australia it is probably "parasitized" to some extent by the Pallid Cuckoo.

The nest described above was a typical one. Suspended between two parallel twigs, it was deep cup-shaped in form, measuring $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter by 4 inches deep. Mainly constructed of dried grass stems, it contained also a few long pieces of bark fibre, the lining consisting of fine grass and a few rootlets, the whole being so finely constructed that the eggs could be observed through the nest from the ground 25 feet below.

Typical eggs are of a pale purplish-red ground colour, with a few rounded spots of dark purplish-red, mainly on

the larger end; other less common types have varying shades of ground colour between reddish-salmon and purplish-red. They vary in numbers between two and four to a sitting, the usual number being three. Measurements of a typical clutch are 1.15 x 0.8 inches, 1.11 x 0.79 inches, 1.03 x 0.75 inches.

In November, 1934, I was in Maryborough, Queensland. Little Friar-birds were very common in the gardens and several pairs were seen feeding young in the nest. The food was carried to the young birds by both parents and appeared to consist entirely of insects. Although this bird is grouped with the honeyeaters, it is doubtful whether nectar forms any part of its diet, its food consisting mainly of insects with some seeds and probably fruits—native and otherwise. Dr. W. D. K. MacGillivray, writing of this species, says: "Near Blackall seen feasting on the flowers of the Queamurra (*Eremophila bignoniæflora*).". That suggests that the bird was drinking nectar, although they were possibly taking insects from the flowers.

It is a very noisy bird with harsh calls resembling those of other Friar-birds, uttered constantly during the day, even in the hottest weather. The species appears to be migratory to Victoria, arriving in September and October, and immediately commencing to nest. In Queensland its breeding extends from October to April.

"Glutinous" Threads.—Concerning the "glutinous substance" now reproduced so clearly for the third time in *The Emu* I have seen it many times with Yellow Robins and other insectivorous birds, and have always assumed it to be spider silk. I think there could be little doubt that it was silk in the case of some Yellow Robins, for I was close enough to see that a large spider had been fed to the nestling.

As is well known, silk issues from the spinnerets in liquid form, hardening on exposure to the air. The parent bird would probably grip a spider by the abdomen, pressure resulting in the emission of some silk. This, when exposed to the air, would adhere to the bill of the parent bird and more silk would be drawn out of the spinnerets as it withdrew its bill.

One often sees silk adhering to the heads and bills of both parents and nestlings after food has been delivered. In that instance, however, it is usually the surrounding silk of spider cocoons or the spider's snare, which has been inadvertently conveyed to the nestlings. I have seen parents picking it off their nestlings. This is very different in appearance from the thread-like "stream" which appears to issue from the body of a spider victim, or a larva.

We must not lose sight of the fact that silk issues in the same liquid form from the bodies of many butterflies and moth larvae which are fed to nestlings, so it may not always be spider silk.—EDITH COLEMAN, Blackburn, Vic., 9/11/38.