Notes on the Rufous Bristle-bird

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It was Professor McCoy who first described this species and named it Sphenura broadbenti, in honour of the collector Kendall Broadbent, an ornithologist of the Queensland Museum. The generic name, first given by Lichtenstein, was found to have been employed previously and the generic name Dasyornis, given by Vigors and Horsfield, in 1827, when describing the Eastern Bristle-bird (D. brachypterus) was applied. It seems remarkable that the Rufous species was not discovered until over sixty years after the Eastern Bristle-bird, considering it is by no means rare in its particular habitat.

The Rufous Bristle-bird has a limited distribution, being found on the coastline west of Port Phillip Bay, extending inland at the Otway Ranges and continuing on the coast to possibly as far as the Mount Lofty Ranges, South Australia. A specimen in the H. L. White collection was secured on the Coorong, South Australia, between the sand-dunes and the sea. The species is also found in the south-west of Western Australia and is confined to about thirty miles of coastal country between Cape Naturaliste and Cape Mentelle. My observations have been confined to the vicinity of Lorne, in the Otway Ranges. I have seen the birds on the sea-blown slopes where the vegetation is a few feet high, with the spray of the sea sweeping across; on the steep sides of the ranges facing the sea; and in the forest valleys where the undergrowth is extremely dense.

One's first impressions of any new species are always interesting. When passing along the Great Ocean Road on my first visit to Lorne I heard the call of a bird that was very much like the notes of a Pilot-bird. The bird later proved to be the Rufous Bristle-bird. To me there is a great similarity in the call of these two species. The call varies considerably, but may be described as 'cheep cheep chew chew chew-cee-c,' loud and penetrating, which is answered
by the mate with a single note 'twik.' There is also an alarm note, 'tweek,' loud and staccato, which the birds utter when alarmed. I have stood within three feet of the birds when calling and the rich resonant notes are something to be remembered. I was also impressed by the general likeness of the bird to the female English Blackbird, particularly at a distance. It has the same habit of running with the head forward and tail slightly elevated; the general coloration is also similar. The bird is rather a poor flyer. I have never seen it fly more than a few feet above the ground, except when crossing the river or a road cutting. The bird prefers to keep to the floor of the forest, running with bursts of speed, and occasionally mounting a low stick or stump to survey the vicinity or utter its call.

Two years ago I heard birds calling in the vicinity of the St. George River, Lorne, and suspected that they had a nest nearby. After waiting for about thirty minutes I saw a bird gathering food on the opposite bank of the river, then cross the river and enter the dense scrub quite close to me. I made a search but was unsuccessful in finding the nest. The bird was soon noticed gathering food on the open hillside, and then, with food in its beak, to enter the scrub about thirty yards from where it had entered previously. Similar actions continued for some time but still I could not find the nest. Feeling baffled—because once the bird entered the scrub it was lost to sight—I was contemplating the next move, when I saw the bird, appearing to be carrying food, cross the track and enter the scrub about 250 yards from where I was investigating. Hastening to the spot, I noticed a clump of sword grass about thirty feet in from the track. This seemed a likely place for a nest, and sure enough, on investigation I located the nest, about four feet from the ground. There were two young birds in the nest. The birds had been travelling a considerable distance, running through the dense scrub on leaving or returning to the nest.

The nest is a bulky structure, with an entrance at the side, composed, usually, of fine sticks, coarse grasses or sedges, and having the inside lined with fine grass. One nest that I discovered this last season was lined with wool. The nest is usually placed about four feet above the ground and a favoured situation is a clump of sword grass. I have found nests in a bunch of dead sticks surrounded by soft bracken fern and another nest in quite an open space among dead sticks, though on the ground.

The nesting season extends from September to December, under normal conditions, with the height of the nesting period October and November. The birds are very local and keep to a limited area. I have found the nest of presumably the one pair of birds in the same locality year after
Type of scrub frequented by the Rufous Bristle-bird at Lorne, Victoria.

Photo by C. L. Lang.

Photo by C. L. Lamb.
year. Nevertheless the nest is not necessarily close to that
of the previous season but from sixty to one hundred yards
distant.

The bird lays a clutch of two eggs, rather large for the
size of the bird. There is a great variation in coloration,
even in eggs of the same region. The egg, when freshly laid,
is pink, and is covered with rather large blotches of brown
to the other extreme of being so finely speckled with brown
dots as to appear as a wholly reddish-brown egg. In all
clutches of eggs that I have examined, including nine
clutches in the H. L. White collection, as well as those in
the field, one egg is always decidedly lighter in colour than
the other. This also seems to be a characteristic of the
eggs of *D. brachypterus* and *D. longirostris*.

The food consists of caterpillars, beetles, moths and the
like, also seeds. I have seen the birds working over rather
bare areas apparently gathering very small seeds. The
young are fed exclusively on insects. One would imagine
that the Rufous Bristle-bird, living in such an environment,
would be extremely shy, but I have not found it so, and
have had no difficulty in obtaining a series of photographs.
After the first few visits to the nest the birds seemed to
take no notice of the camera, other than to eye it with
suspicion occasionally. This has enabled me to obtain a
close-up view of this handsome bird. The general appear-
ance is brown, breast lighter, throat mottled dusky, wings
and crown of head rufous. A notable feature are the strong
bristles projecting from the gape. Another feature is the
erection of the feathers on the crown of the head, which
gives the bird the appearance of having a crest. At the
same time the feathers of the tail are often fanned out.

On November 23, 1945, I witnessed a very fine display
by this species. I observed a bird on the tourist track at
St. George River, Lorne, feeding on what appeared to be
small seeds. Suddenly it gave its loud characteristic call
which was answered by the ‘twik’ of its mate from the
scrub beside the track. This bird then joined the one on
the track and they gave a very fine display. With wings
slightly drooped and outspread, tail feathers fanned out
and crown feathers erected, they would face each other,
bowing, then run in a short circle and stop, and jump side-
ways several times. Then the performance would be
repeated. I witnessed this display for about three minutes
—till the birds were disturbed by tourists coming along
the track. This is the only occasion I have seen such a display
and do not know if it is usual with this species as observa-
tions are difficult owing to the birds keeping to the thick
scrub.

Belcher’s *Birds of the District of Geelong* contains some
interesting notes on the species.