

Notes from the Murphy's Creek District, Queensland

By E. A. R. LORD

A MAGPIE PROBLEM

For many years I have encouraged Magpies to come about my home and have fed them more freely than perhaps I should have done, as recent results have unfortunately proved. Originally I had one pair which became quite tame. This was back in 1921. The female accidentally injured her wing, which took several weeks to mend and was afterwards partly drooped, but her flight was not impaired.

Unfortunately, this bird and her nestlings died from poisoned bread, which she had accidentally found, that had been used for poisoning rats. The male soon found a new mate and the partnership lasted until 1934, when he was killed by a cat.

In January 1935 a white-backed male bird, the only white-back recorded from this district, joined the female of the home territory and the union lasted until 1945. He never became as tame as the black-backed birds, and was a bully to all male birds that came near the house area or in cultivated paddocks on the farm.

When the breeding season of 1945 came round the white-backed bird paired with a black-backed female a mile east of his former territory. Within a few days the deserted female was joined by a black-backed male bird, which became exceptionally tame and friendly and soon learned to feed from my hand. At the time of his arrival, he was a mature bird with full white upper neck.

In due course his mate, which was of an advanced age, was missing from the territory, and old Jack, as I had named him, took to himself a new mate, a female with a grey margin to the white neck feathers at the base of the neck, and which would have been, I considered, in her fourth year. At first she was not tame, but soon accustomed herself to conditions and the name of Jill was given to her.

These two birds are still in possession of the home territory, and Jack, a sedate old bird, remains king of the flock of about forty birds that visit the homestead area, which is neutral territory except the nesting portion used annually by Jack and Jill.

Each pair of mated birds retires to its own territory at the end of July when nest building usually commences.

Possibly most of my flocks have descended from the ancestral pair of 1921.

There are times when the birds serve a useful purpose in destroying pests such as caterpillars and grasshoppers, but I regret having to admit that many have become dependent on the easy food supply that I have been handing out to them

morning and evening, and show little desire to hunt their own food. Indeed, there is little that they will not eat.

During the late summer and autumn months of this year grasshoppers were plentiful and Plovers and White-faced Herons were attracted to them, as were some of the Magpies. Grey birds of a year or less of age and grey-necked birds in their second and third year found little interest in a grasshopper diet and remained fairly constantly around the house, flying to me and running about my feet when I moved about.

It became necessary for me to cover the cats' milk when the animals had finished drinking, and to feed my fowls in an enclosure to prevent the magpies stealing their food.

I found it necessary to cease feeding the birds in an endeavour to make them hunt for their natural food, the result being that their attention was turned to my garden, where all gooseberry bushes were stripped of their fruit and tomatoes had to be covered with fine-meshed netting to prevent their being consumed.

I became very attached to my magpie flock, numbers of which would feed from my hand, so it was with reluctance that I had to try and starve them out to make them dependent on their natural food.

Some descendants of the 1935-45 white-backed bird are amongst my flock, two with broad white bands across the back; one with a large light grey back patch and another with a large white patch across the back.

NESTING EPISODES

September 15, 1956. Nesting Magpies have a strong objection to trespassing birds within their nesting territory. A few days ago a male bird was feeding on rising flying ants near the nesting tree when his mate gave the alarm call, a querulous 'peek-peek-peek', suggesting annoyance at the presence of some undesirable intruder. The male bird ceased feeding and was instantly on the wing giving his imperious battle call.

Seeking the offending creature I discovered that it was one of their previous year's young birds which had unwisely trespassed on forbidden ground and was now making a rapid retreat with the male parent in pursuit.

September 19, 1956.—A pair of White-throated Warblers are building their nest in a box tree near my yard, the nest being in an early state of construction. The male sings sweetly while the female works. Today it was noticed that the warbling call was more consistent than usual and the reason was found to be the intrusion of another male bird. Both birds took part in the continuous warbling for a period of ten minutes, the female continuing with her work.

Though the battle cry may have seemed formidable to the participating and no doubt angry birds, it sounded to me very sweet music.

BLACK-FACED CUCKOO-SHRIKES

Three Cuckoo-Shrikes have been in regular attendance in a favoured nesting area. These are presumably the owners of that territory, and a young bird of the previous season.

On September 24, 1956, two birds were endeavouring to send the third bird away. Much chasing, in which the three birds participated, took place for some time. The battle call, 'char char char', sounds harmless enough to human ears, but to the battling birds it no doubt sounds very war-like.

The whole event seems quite harmless as no contact between the birds was made—just chasing and occasional passes, one bird at the other, when neither wing nor beak seemed to connect.

WHITE-FACED HERONS AND CROWS

On October 4, 1956, a pair of Herons had a nest in mistle-toe on a creek blue gum and one bird was brooding. The birds were attacked by a pair of Crows and later I found four empty egg shells on the ground below the nest. The Crows took possession of the ready-made nest and reared a brood of three young ones in it.

While one bird, presumably the female, was brooding, the white-eyed mate with some feathers missing from the right wing, was constantly searching for food for himself and the brooding bird. After the eggs had hatched, both birds were busy gathering any food that was available, including eggs from my fowl run and fruit from the garden.

A Note on the Plumed Pigeon.—I have just returned from a trip to Elkedra Station, in the Northern Territory, 300 miles north-west of Alice Springs. The Plumed Pigeon (*Lophophaps plumifera*) was often seen—mostly in the rocky spinifex country, with a preference for dry creek beds, and hilly terrain. The birds are extremely bold, and one can approach within ten feet of them before they fly. Flight is marked by a loud clapping of wings, but the birds rarely fly more than a hundred yards before alighting. Usually they prefer running away to flying, and it is only when an observer comes too close that they take to the wing.

In the field they appear dark brown, and it is only when one approaches closely that their attractive colours can be observed. In many cases they harmonize very well with their surroundings. For some reason the Plumed Pigeon is seen much more around midday than any other time. Birds often visited the fowlyard at Elkedra, when the fowls were being fed, and it was an easy matter to catch them. When a flock of these Pigeons are flushed, only some fly and the others stay concealed.

They lay their eggs on the ground, under some spinifex, or a low bush. In this area they breed after the rains.—**REX ELLIS, McLaren Vale, S.A., 19/7/57.**