Notes on Tasmanian Birds

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III. The Collared Sparrowhawk at the Kill

Introduction

For some six months we have been maintaining a small feeding-station at our home in the Mt. Wellington foothills (elevation 800 feet). On Thursday, July 10, 1958, there were Blue Wrens (*Malurus cyaneus*), Silvereyes (*Zosterops lateralis*), House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), Blackbirds (*Turdus merula*), and a female Golden Whistler (*Pachycephala pectoralis*) at a low table in a dense sapling stand of stringy-bark (*Eucalyptus obliqua*), and overhung by limbs of varnish wattle (*Acacia verniciflua*).

Observations

At 1223 hours I walked to the window, about 30 feet from the table, to see a Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter cirrocephalus*) holding a bird to a log near the table with both feet. As I watched, with 12 x 50 Ross binoculars, the Hawk began plucking the bird, subsequently identified as a male House Sparrow. The plucking proceeded rapidly, the Hawk snatching out small beakfuls of body feathers and then shaking its head to free its beak of feathers. It altered the position of its feet at intervals to allow a fresh area of the prey to be exposed. The plucking began on the ventral region and proceeded first to the tail rectrices and then to the right and left wing feathers. The larger feathers were plucked singly or, at most, three at a time. When occasional wind gusts disturbed surrounding foliage, the Hawk would cease feeding activity for a few minutes and remain crouched, looking about warily before recommencing. At 1225 the body of the Sparrow was completely plucked; after a pause the Hawk tore a small hole in the skin of the breast and at 1228 began to eat the flesh.

At about two second intervals it bowed down its head and seized a piece of flesh, slightly lowering its tarsi at the same time. Then it straightened its legs and tore off a small beakful of flesh and bone and swallowed it. The Hawk gripped the intestine with its left claw and pinned it to the log, while attempting to tear it in two, but eventually swallowed it whole. It similarly attempted to tear the head apart, with equal lack of success. The beak parts of the skull were "chewed" or crushed at the base of the Hawk's mandibles for 25 seconds. From 1½ to 4 seconds were taken between beakfuls of other parts of the prey. Apparently the larger bones, except for the skull, were sufficiently broken up to swallow when torn from the body, as the Hawk was not observed to chew them. The meal was

completed at 1240 hours, 17 minutes after the commencement of plucking. Feeding occupied 12 minutes, but was interrupted at times by wind gusts. Finally, the Hawk retrieved a small morsel from lower down the log, after which it wiped its beak on the log in about six rapid movements. Until 1242 it continued to sit, with feathers fluffed out, on the log, and then flew off out of sight in the saplings. An alarm call given twice by a Blackbird was the only sign of the birds which a few minutes before had been feeding at the table. No mobbing developed. An examination of the log showed no hard remains whatsoever. The bill, the feet, and the skull of the Sparrow had all been eaten. Body feathers were strewn for 3 feet around the area.

Sparrow-Hawks have frequently been recorded here, and on a previous occasion I made the following notes:

Sunday, March 16, 1958

I had a Sparrowhawk under continuous observation for a little more than an hour, using Ross 12 x 50 binoculars.

0830 hrs. The Hawk flew from near the house to the roof of a shack 150 feet from the observation window, and some 20 feet lower than my position. A long and thorough toilet took place. The Hawk reached back over its shoulder and "riffled" through the feathers of its mantle and lower back, then reached under its wing from the back and took the flights one at a time in its beak, stripping them from base to tip. Each feather was allowed to flip back into place. Reaching under its wing from the front, the Hawk spread its tail and stripped each of the retrices one at a time in the same way. The remainder of the body feathers were carefully preened with the beak. The Hawk frequently stropped the side of its head on a "shoulder" during these operations.

The toilet was not continuous, and between movements the Sparrowhawk kept a careful watch on small birds in the surrounding orchard, its head turning through 180 degrees to follow the flight of smaller birds, and tilting 90 degrees to watch lizards below in the grass. Three times the Hawk "bobbed" its head horizontally, as some waders do vertically. A Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) fed unconcernedly in a pear tree only 12 feet away, and the Hawk made a crouching flight-intention movement towards it, but then resumed preening.

0900 hrs. The Hawk ceased preening, yawned four times, shook its body, stretched (the left leg out and down, the tail sideways, and the left shoulder out from the body all at the same time), made two crouching flight-intention movements, and flew to a flue-pipe on the shack roof.

0915 hrs. An unwary Sparrow flew up over the shack roof. The Hawk had watched its approach and crouched; then as the Sparrow flew directly over the flue, only 2 feet above the Hawk, the latter flung itself up and over back-

wards, talons extended. The Sparrow plunged into a dense blackberry bush, and the Hawk landed nearby in dense grass. I left the house and approached the shack. The Hawk, on the ground, was eating a small lizard, and flew off at my approach. The Sparrow was still in the blackberry and was difficult to flush, but eventually flew off unharmed. The time was then 0935 hours.

Discussion

It appears from the foregoing observations that the Sparrow-Hawk will take both small birds and lizards, and that it can kill in quite dense cover, but will not follow into brambles. The bird is alert even when preening and sunning, and can launch an attack in an incredibly short space of time, although the prey species may also take fast avoiding action and escape. When it is perched in the open or on a hill, prey species do not always recognize the Sparrowhawk as a menace, but I have seen two Grey Fantails and two Crescent Honeyeaters acting in concert to mob a Sparrowhawk perched in eucalyptus foliage.

Extreme mobility of the head is shown in preening and searching movements, and the purpose of the "bobbing" may be, as has been suggested in the case of waders, to judge distance by relative movement of the objects in the field of vision.—Hugh Wilson, 1950, "Visual Perception among Waders: A suggested Explanation of the Habit of 'Bobbing'," *The Emu*, 50: 128-31.

The efficient stripping of the feathers between the mandibles would tend to dislodge feather-lice and other parasites.

Nankeen Kestrel as Predator on House Mice.—The Nankeen Kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*) is widely recognized as a predator on the introduced House Mouse (*Mus musculus*). Often Kestrels are found frequenting farm buildings and haystacks in search of the rodents. The birds sometimes continue their hunting long after sunset, as reported many years ago by the late Tom Carter in an account of the bird-life of the region of the North-West Cape, Western Australia (*Emu*, III (1), 34, 1903).

When hay or straw carting is carried out the Kestrels swoop down on mice disturbed from the stooks. One bird kept under observation at Sutherlands, S.A., during the morning of February 18, 1948, captured six mice between 6 a.m. and noon. It used a lone tall mallee tree as a look-out perch and it came close beside the waggon and horses to capture the mice. Once it secured a mouse under the waggon-pole right between the horses.—E. F. Boehm, Sutherlands, S.A., 16/11/60.