

## The Black-banded Whiteface

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My first introduction to the Black-banded Whiteface (*Aphelocephala nigricincta*) was in April, 1920, when, by reason of drought, I was compelled to remove our sheep from Moolawatana Station out on to Sandhill Country, towards the N.S.W. border. This belt of sandhills extends from Lake Frome to the N.S.W. border, and for hundreds of miles northwards from the southern end of Lake Frome.

It was in this locality that I found this little banded bird in fair numbers, its very sweet note first calling my attention to "a new bird." I have lived for many years on the western side of Lake Frome, but had not identified this bird, so evidently the sandhill country is its habitat. Lake Frome is only a salt basin, having water on it only after heavy rainfall. It cuts off the sandhill country from open grassy plains extending westerly to the Flinders Range.

During May, 1920, I was fortunate enough to find this bird breeding, although at that time the country was in the grip of the drought, which eventually broke on May 31st, with a good general rain. It was noticed that few of these birds had hatched out young before the rain came, still practically all were nesting. Have some birds the power to forecast rain?

The nest is rather a bulky, domed-shaped structure, and is invariably placed in a prickly bush or shrub. I noted nests only in the "Deadfinish" (*Acacia ulicina*) and "Roley Policy," or Russian Thistle (*Salsola kali*), both bushes being of a prickly nature. The outside of the nest is usually composed of dark-coloured twigs, making it rather conspicuous. Inside these dark-coloured twigs is placed a lining of flower stems and flower pods, with a final lining of soft feathers. The entrance to the nest is a long narrow funnel about 1 inch in diameter, and 6 to 9 inches in length. This funnel is lined with feathers for a third of the distance from the egg cavity. To inspect the contents of these nests, it is necessary to break open the funnels, but I was surprised to find that the bird did not resent this interference.

In all I inspected nine nests, containing eggs, and though all were in various stages of incubation, I found only one set of three eggs, the set being otherwise of two eggs. I also found several nests with young, but only two were in the nest on every occasion. As the season was far from a normal one, I thought that Nature had provided that short sets should be laid.

In April, 1921, my brother visited this locality, and, though he told me he had inspected a number of nests, he failed to find more than two eggs to the clutch. Now, this season is the best on record, and most birds are laying full sets, many even having ab-

normally large clutches. I mention this, as A. J. North, in "Nest and Eggs," gives the clutch as 3 or 4. In May of this year I went into this sandhill country principally at the request of Captain S. A. White, who asked me to secure a specimen of the young from the nest. Whilst out there I found five nests of the Black-banded Whiteface, but in every instance only two young were in the nests. Two young birds I have presented to the South Australian Museum; both show the adult plumage, and also have down-like feathers on the head.

In the building of its nest, both birds share in the carrying, but only one, the female, I presume, does the building. I noted that both birds left the nest together after material. Only one carried material on returning to the nest, which it worked into place, whilst the mate sat on a bush whistling sweetly until the builder was finished; then the whistler flew off alone, and returned with a piece of material, which the builder took and worked into the nest. When this was done, both birds flew off together, but only one carried stuff back to the nest, and the above system of building was continued. One would think that the presumably male bird considered it impossible for its mate to build correctly unless he was whistling on the bush above the nest. I watched one pair on several occasions, and two or three other pairs once, but each pair worked on the same lines, each bird carrying in its turn, never together, and undoubtedly only one bird built the nest.

When I took the young birds in May this year, I noted that in each nest the long funnel had been broken out, evidently to allow the parent birds more easily to feed the young, which were all nearly ready to leave the nest.

Though two Bore Streams ran through the part I visited, I failed to note one of these birds at water. I camped for three months in 1920 on the water, and these birds, although numerous close to the water, were never actually seen along the Bore Stream. Most birds were watering during that dry period.

The Black-banded Whiteface spends a great deal of its time on the ground after insects, which are its principal food. It has an unusually loud sweet whistling note, and when not breeding is to be found in small flocks.

The eggs of this bird are very different from those of its congener, the common Whiteface (*Aphelocephala leucopsis*). The texture of the shell is finer, the egg is narrower and more pointed, while it is lighter in coloration, with the blotches and markings more diffused.

Though there were plenty of dry hollow stumps and small hollows in trees close to where these birds were breeding, I did not find that they had used any of them. The common Whiteface was nesting in some of the hollows.