

The Wild Life of a Queensland Lily Pond

Notes on Jacanas and Chicks

By (Mrs.) L. M. MAYO, R.A.O.U., South Brisbane, Qld.

On October 5, 1931, I motored out to Lily Pond early and stayed two hours. I noticed a Jacana, in fine plumage and with brilliant crest, on the leaves at the other side of the pond. On using field glasses, I was surprised to find two shadowy tiny chicks on leaves beside the adult bird. They looked newly hatched, and it is hard to describe their wraith-like appearance. In spite of that they were active and fed independently of their escort. A cow feeding on leaves in the water disturbed the adult Jacana; it made a strong flight down the pond and out of sight, leaving the chicks alone. I watched them for some time, fearing that the cow would engulf them with one of the broad leaves. Presently my tired eyes lost the chicks, and I turned the glasses on to the adult bird (evidently a male), that was again in range. He made short flights up and down the lily leaves, calling in rather a distressed way as he flew. At last he found the chicks at some little distance from where he had left them, and guided them down the pond to where another bird (I took it for the mother—she was very pale coloured) crouched low, perhaps on a nest.

On October 13 I went out to the pond again early, and stayed four hours. A pair of Jacanas left the lily leaves and strayed about under the trees feeding close to me. They were fine birds and in good plumage. They had no difficulty in walking and feeding in the grass. I was nearly two hours searching before I located the chicks; this time they were in the company of a washed-out-looking adult bird—most likely the mother. I spent nearly two hours watching the interesting doings of the chicks. One, much smaller than the other, snuggled occasionally under the mother's wing. They had made surprisingly little growth, if any, during the week, and still fed independently of the adult; not once did I see her offer them food or call them. They went a good way afield on the leaves. As I saw them through the glasses, they looked about a couple of inches long—the bodies, that is—and had grey-brown backs and white under parts. They were high on their legs, and had bills big for the size of their bodies, and sharply pointed but broad at the base.

Two days later (October 15) I was again at the pond bright and early, and spent four hours in a vain search for the Jacana chicks. There were three adult Jacanas on the pond, continually harassed by Moorhens (*Gallinula tenebrosa*), and perhaps, I thought, the mother bird had the

chicks in hiding. The Moorhens eventually chased the Jacanas off the water, and they stayed in the grass around the edge of the pond feeding and having sun-baths, lying on their sides with legs stretched out in a most luxurious fashion, and within a very few yards of where I sat as still as a rock. The adult birds are strong fliers, but the chicks did not fly at any period of my observing. As I have already remarked, they were not to be found this day.

On October 21 I visited the pond again for a few hours, but no chicks to be found. During November Mr. G. H. Barker, R.A.O.U., gave me a permit to observe Jacanas on the Waterworks sanctuary at Enoggera. There were any amount of adult birds there, all—together with the Ducks (not many of the latter)—very wild and scary. During three days' observation I did not find one Jacana chick. There may have been some there; they are certainly hard to find among the moving leaves at any time.

In addition to the Jacanas on the lily pond, I noted also the following:—

Gallinula tenebrosa. Dusky Moorhen.—There were plenty of these active, cantankerous birds on the pond; feeding big chicks that were uncoloured. A Moorhen's mission in life seems to be to annoy all the birds in its vicinity.

Fulica atra. Coot.—A couple of pairs were swimming about among the reed beds.

Podiceps ruficollis. Little Grebe.—Very plentiful and feeding tiny, quaint-looking chicks. The chicks had striped heads and necks, and red down the side of the face; they grew very quickly. The parent birds made a trilling note as they rose above the water with food and the chicks would make a beeline for them.

Lobibyx novæ-hollandiæ. Spur-winged Plover.—Plentiful here as elsewhere this year.

Chlidonias leucopareia. Marsh Tern.—Nine of these graceful birds hunted over the pond one day for an hour, then rested on an old black log in the water—a picturesque setting.

Anhinga novæ-hollandiæ. Darter.—Several pairs to be seen.

Threskiornis molucca. White Ibis.—Many of these birds were perched among the eucalypts. Others were feeding round the margins of the pond.

Egretta alba. White Egret.—Plentiful. Kept mostly to the trees.

Notophoxyx novæ-hollandiæ. White-faced Heron.—A few about—just casuals.

Microcarbo melanoleucus. Little Pied Cormorant.—One specimen only to be seen.

Querquedula gibberifrons, Grey Teal; *Dendrocygna arcuata*, Whistling Tree Duck; *Anas superciliosa*, Grey Duck. All of these three birds were to be seen in long lines, sleeping the day away among the reeds and lilies, and on tree boles by the water. Although I hear that this "sanctuary" is often shot over, the birds are not nearly so wild as those on Enoggera Waterworks.

Phalacrocorax ater. Little Black Cormorant.—A dozen or so were on the water each day of my visit. The pond seems full of fish—some of them quite large—and eels. It is rather unlikely that many Grebes or other chicks could reach maturity on a pond infested with eels.

Eurystomus orientalis. Dollar Bird.—Nested in the hollow limbs of eucalypts nearby, as did the Forest Kingfisher (*Halcyon macleayi*) and the Sacred Kingfisher (*H. sanctus*).

The Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina novæ-hollandiæ*), the Kookaburra (*Dacelo gigas*), Whistling Eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*), the Welcome Swallow (*Hirundo neoxena*) and the Tree Martin (*Hylochelidon nigricans*), were all to be observed and I watched a Willie Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) lay the foundation of a nest and finish it very neatly and carefully on my third visit. Leaden Flycatchers (*Myiagra rubecula*) were in the trees calling "per-it-ee", "per-it-ee", but I could not find their nests. A Black-headed Pardalote (*P. melanocephalus*) flew in and out of a nesting hollow in a clayey bank and the Pied Butcher-Bird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*) kept up an incessant call.

Magpie Nesting on a Stone Wall.—While the customary nesting site of the White-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*) is among the branches of a tree, there are times when a pair of these birds, apparently failing to obtain a tree to their liking, will nest in unorthodox places. Such, evidently, had occurred in the case of a pair the nest of which I discovered on a stone wall fringing a road near Melton, a hamlet on the plains to the west of Melbourne. Motoring through the district one day in early spring, I caught sight of some sticks resembling a nest wedged between two of the loose stones on top of the wall, and when I stopped for the purpose of examining it, a Magpie arose from the site and flew out across the adjoining paddock. The bird had been sitting low in the nest as if to escape detection, and for that reason was not visible from the road. The well-made nest contained four eggs, which in the following week gave place to young birds. In spite of the exposed position and the presence close by of a school, to get to which the children passed the nest each day, the eggs remained undisturbed and the young Magpies were brought to maturity and safely launched upon the world.

It was impossible to learn the reason for the selection of the site by the birds, for although trees are comparatively scarce on these widely-flung plains, there are certainly sufficient for all the Magpie population. Perhaps the Magpie is a discriminating bird and will refrain from using trees that it considers unsuitable. At all events this was not the first known instance of the bird nesting on a stone wall, since Mr. A. G. Campbell once told me that he had found it nesting in such situations in the same locality; and two years ago I confirmed an observation of his, which he made from a train, of a Magpie nesting on the ground. The nest that I then found was a disused one, but there was every indication that its position between two or three stones had been definitely selected by the bird.—MICHAEL SHARLAND, R.A.O.U., Sydney.