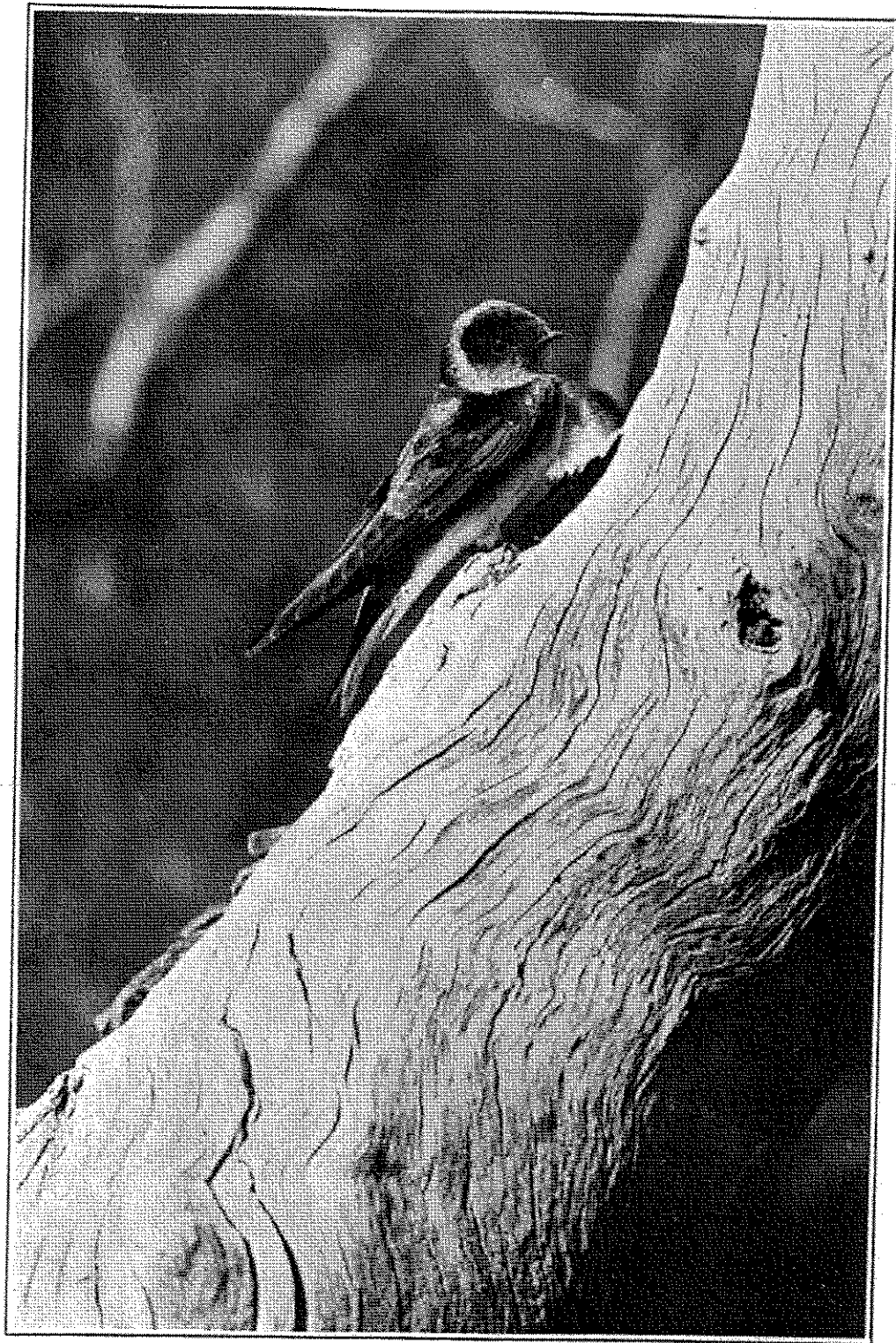


In the Haunt of the Tree-Swallows

By NORMAN CHAFFER, R.A.O.U., Roseville, N.S.W.

During a holiday on the Blue Mountains a visit was made on October 25, 1931, to Minne-ha-ha Falls, near Katoomba. We proceeded by car to the end of the road, which terminates some distance from the falls. A few hundred yards from this spot a gently sloping hillside was clothed with eucalypts, about 30 feet in height. They were a picturesque group of trees, with quaintly twisted branches and trunks conspicuously marbled with cream and grey. As I gazed at them I became aware of a company of birds flying around and among the trees. Even in the distance they were easily recognised as Tree-Martins (*Hylochelidon nigricans*). Leaving the remainder of the party to proceed on foot to the falls, I made a closer inspection.

What a busy scene met my eye. The trees were plentifully supplied with dead hollow spouts and knot holes, and the Tree-Martins, or Tree-Swallows, as they are very often called, were industriously engaged in nest building. Others were busy hawking for food, either skimming among the trees with effortless flight, or ascending to some elevation to wheel about in pursuit of insects. They appeared to work in groups. For some minutes the trees would be quite deserted, and then suddenly would be alive with a wheeling company of the dainty little creatures. They came swooping in from the flat below from where the nesting material was being gathered. Not all of the arrivals were carrying nesting material, but such as were appeared to work the others up into a great state of excitement. This was particularly noticeable when a bird arrived with an extra large piece of material, with several others in attendance, flying excitedly around. The attendant birds may be young of a previous brood. The scene was full of animation. Birds were popping in and out of the hollows, while others fluttered about the entrance or flitted to and fro among the trees. They were a happy throng and filled the air with delightful twitterings. Little groups would perch on the dead outer branches and twitter away while their mates disappeared in the hollows. They appeared to have an aversion to perching on living branches. The effect of the combined notes of the whole company was particularly pleasing to the ear. Suddenly, as though at a given signal, the birds would depart either to gather more nesting material or to hawk for insects. As they skimmed away, the light-coloured rump showed up conspicuously. After all the bustle the surroundings bore a most deserted appearance during the absence of the birds. Soon, however, they would return, and the very trees



Tree-Martin at nesting hollow.

Photo. by Norman Chaffer, R.A.O.U.

seemed to spring into animated life as the birds resumed their nest building. In watching their various activities, and listening to their pretty twittering song, I experienced a keen sense of pleasure.

I have previously associated the nest building of the Tree-Swallows with big timber, particularly the tall ring-barked trees on partly cleared land. I have watched them entering the hollow spouts usually somewhere in the vicinity of 70 feet from the ground. Here, however, the highest nesting hollow was only about 25 feet from the ground and the lowest about 12 feet. Some trees contained several nests, often quite close together. Some of the knot holes were so small that one would imagine a mouse could scarcely squeeze through, but the Tree-Swallows entered without trouble. These holes apparently opened out much larger inside, for often two birds would enter one after the other and both remain inside together. At times more than one pair of birds appeared to assist in the building of a nest, but, owing to the constant movement of the birds, this was difficult to ascertain for certain. Several would often be fluttering in front of the one hollow. The materials brought to the nest were mud, fibrous grasses, and flat leaves. The leaves were sometimes a couple of inches long, quite large for the size of the bird. One nesting hollow I examined contained a goodly number of leaves strewn on the bottom of the hollow, with, as far as I could see, no other material. The subject of the accompanying photograph brought all three materials but most often mud. Although this and many of the other nesting hollows were comparatively low, they were mostly inaccessible, and could not be examined. At first I thought that all the birds were nest building, but one hollow examined contained large young, three in number, I believe. I was unable to get them out to examine them. All the other nests that I examined were only being built, and certainly many of the inaccessible nests were in course of construction. Some of those which I could not examine may have contained eggs or young. Possibly the nest builders were preparing for a second brood, and the young birds may have been a late edition of a first brood.

I arrived early at the Tree-Swallows' colony on the following day, intent on securing a photograph of the birds. Operations were commenced on the lowest nest site, a knot hole 12 feet from the ground. My camera was lashed to a pole, which in turn was tied to a step-ladder, from the top of which I focussed my camera. For some time the birds would not approach, and when they did they would fly straight in the hollow without pause. I blocked up the hole, but this only sufficed to excite the birds, which, accompanied by several others, would flutter around without

alighting. After unsuccessfully spending an hour and a half at this nest, I transferred to another in a hollow spout about 15 feet from the ground. The birds became quite excited, and on several occasions alighted on the spout while I was focussing. The accompanying photograph was taken without moving away from the camera. Portion of a second bird may be seen behind the main subject. Shortly afterwards a photograph was taken of three birds together on the branch, which picture, however, was spoilt by being a little out of focus. When the excitement subsided the birds would not approach until I moved back a little. They afterwards came to the nest quite readily, both birds sometimes going in together with nesting materials. One photograph was secured of a bird bringing a large leaf to the nest. They would rarely alight in the desired position, and the majority of photographs taken were not satisfactory.

The Tree-Swallow viewed at close quarters is a very elegant and pretty little creature. The underparts are pale buff to whitish, with the throat faintly streaked with brown. The wings and tail are dark brown, and the rump pale buff faintly streaked with brown. The back and head are glossy blue-black and the forehead light tan brown. The light-coloured crown and side of the head of the bird in the photograph are due to the light reflected from the glossy plumage. In flight it may easily be confused with the Fairy Martin (*Hylochelidon ariel*), which it resembles in most particulars. The chief points in which they differ are the smaller size and the rufous head of the Fairy Martin.

A Queer Nesting Site.—One week-end in October, 1931, my husband told me of a bird's nest—"a most untidy mixture of mud and long straws"—that he had found in the opening of the canvas sail cover that stretched over the boom of the "Navahoe." Not realising at first that the structure was a bird's nest, he had roughly pulled it down, putting to flight a small bird, that "looked like a Swallow but was not one," sitting on four eggs in the nest. Damaged beyond mending, the nest was thrown overboard. A week or two passed, and my husband informed me that the birds had built again in the same place, so I went across to the moorings to have a look, and found a Tree Martin (*Hylochelidon nigricans*) brooding one cold egg in a partly dislodged mass of mud and long straws that was half in, half out of the sail cover. On the deck below the boom three eggs lay smashed. A fierce storm on the preceding day had evidently destroyed the birds' second nesting effort. They have not built again afloat.—(MRS.) L. M. MAYO, R.A.O.U., South Brisbane, Queensland.