

## Stray Feathers

**Defeating the Babbler.**—The most wilful destroyer of nests here, in the Murphys Creek district, Queensland, is the Grey-crowned Babbler. Finches, Warblers and Thornbills are the principal victims, but occasionally other birds suffer. One day I saw a Babbler family enjoying themselves "dancing" on the nest and eggs of a pair of Rufous Whistlers, smashing the eggs and destroying the nest. The Whistlers made a brave attempt to drive the Babblers away, but what chance had they against a dozen Babblers?

On three occasions I came just in time to save the nest of a pair of Yellow-tailed Thornbills near my dairy. The Babblers had torn a hole in the side of the nest and were pulling out the lining from it, as well as through the natural opening. On each occasion the "Yellow-tails" repaired the damage but a fourth time the Babblers came. I could see showers of feathers floating away in the breeze and a noisy crew of Babblers just completing their work of ripping the nest to pieces. Those are but two of many cases that I have witnessed, and always the Babblers make a pastime of this pulling or dancing nests to pieces.

During the last two years I have found several Yellow-tailed Thornbills' nests built into the underside of Babblers' nests, some of which have been in use, others of which were old. The Thornbills' nests built in such situations were never interfered with by Babblers, which probably did not recognize that they were not part of their own nests.

During the early part of the present nesting season a pair of Thornbills, after having their nests destroyed by Babblers, built a second nest into the underside of a Magpies' nest which was in use and where the Babblers dared not to trespass.

Quite recently I saw some Diamond Firetail Finches carrying strands of grass into a Babblers' disused nest. From the nest a brood was successfully reared. Two other Babblers' nests not far away were also in use by Firetails. That is the first record I have of Finches using Babblers' nests.

It may be that the Blue-faced Honeyeater began using Babblers' nests for breeding purposes for protective reasons, as in open forest where Babblers' nests are available it is rarely that those Honeyeaters build their own nests. But in rough country where Babblers do not penetrate and where Blue-faced Honeyeaters are plentiful, nests of their own building are frequently found, usually placed in a thick, drooping branch of *Casuarina* or *Eucalyptus* trees.—E. A. R. LORD, Murphys Creek, Qld., 8/3/36.

**A Visit to Hampshire Hills.**—A few weeks ago some friends from Burnie, Tasmania, and I motored from the

north-west coast, south through Ridgley and Oonah to an old settlement of the Van Diemen's Land Company, but one which has been deserted, save for a few small cottage-dwellings, for a long period. The headquarters of the Company were, in 1827, at Circular Head, whence their surveyor, Henry Hellyer, was sent out into the bush with some assigned men (convicts) to search for and mark out any large fertile tracts suitable for sheep and cattle runs. Hellyer was an Englishman not long out, but he proved himself a fine bushman and a great worker, and on this occasion secured for the Company the Hampshire Hills block of 10,000 acres, and the huge Surrey Hills area of 150,000 acres. He also ascended and named that fine mountain, Valentine's Peak, beginning the ascent on February 14, 1827, and completing it on the day following.

On the present occasion we crossed the Emu River by a small wooden bridge not far from the spot where Hellyer had crossed it on a spar twenty feet above the water, more than a century before. Driving up the hill on the farther side we presently came to a fine clump of silver wattles by the wayside, where we decided to camp for lunch out of the heat of the sun. While making preparations for boiling the billy, we were startled by a harsh cry above our heads, where a pair of Falcons dashed across the tree-tops, one coming to a halt on top of a high, charred stump about thirty feet away, the other making off to a clump of eucalypts in an easterly direction. Scarlet Robins and Brown Thornbills were also seen, and the pleasant call-notes heard of the Yellow-throated Honeyeater (*Meliphaga flavicollis*), which seems just as much at home on high downland, such as the Hampshire, or on mountain-tops, as among the banksias and gums at sea-level. We expected to see Black Cockatoos among these timbered hills and listened attentively for their wailing notes, but without result. About a month previously, when on the flats of the Cam River, much nearer to the coast, we saw and heard quite a large party of these handsome birds passing among the eucalypts which bordered the flats, and keeping up their continuous, customary querulous calling as they flew.

The great feature of bird-life on these Hampshire Hills, which are much like the English downs, with the addition of many more trees, is the presence of the Pipit (*Anthus australis*) in almost incredible numbers. As we drove along, mile after mile, these elegant little ground birds would rise and flit away to right or left, the white outer tail-feathers showing conspicuously as they rose from the short herbage. This species seems to prefer the higher class of country for feeding and nesting. From what we saw on this occasion, I should say they are in the proportions of twenty in this high country to one at the coast-level.—H. S. DOVE, Devonport, Tas., 15/4/36.



Little Crow (*Corvus bennetti*) at nest.

Photo. by L. G. Chandler.

**Notes on the Little Crow.**—In the Red Cliffs district it is rarely that one finds nests of a Crow or Raven in a position suitable for photographic purposes. Usually they are situated in the topmost branches of a tall, isolated tree. In September of last year (1935) a friend told me that he had found a Raven's nest, containing six eggs, about twenty-five feet from the ground in a Mallee eucalypt. When I climbed the tree to examine the nest and eggs the birds came within fifty yards and made a great demonstration. It was then that I discovered that the birds were not Ravens but Little Crows (*Corvus bennetti*). Their call is a "kar, kar" quickly repeated. The eggs were uniformly spotted with dark-brown markings over a greenish-grey base. Thirty feet away a Kestrel was sitting on five beautiful eggs in a spout of a dead tree. I waited until the young were hatched and then long Mallee gum saplings were cut and firmly secured in the ground and lashed to the tree, and a twenty-foot ladder placed in position against this scaffolding. Five feet above the ladder a branch was wired to supports to take the camera on a kodapod, and a dummy camera tied to the branch and left there for several days.

When the old birds had overcome their fear of the dummy the camera was placed in position and the dummy removed. I secreted myself, release in hand, in a bag hide, and my assistant departed and waited, two hundred yards away, for my signals. Although the Crows came close—they were chasing and catching grasshoppers within twenty yards of me—it was nearly three hours before one alighted on the nest and fed the young ones. I took three photographs at half-hour intervals but the light was bad for taking a photograph of a black bird, and I was not satisfied with the results. I returned on three other days at intervals of a week or two but found that the Crows had a habit of feeding their young towards evening and the light was then too dull for good photography. I spent fourteen or fifteen hours in all in the hide, but none of the photographs, with the exception of the first one taken, was sufficiently exposed to give a good picture of the bird.

I took photographs of two of the young Crows just before they left the nest. An examination of pellets that they ejected and of their excreta revealed the fact that they were being fed on grasshoppers, beetles and other insect life, and a certain amount of a purple-coloured fruit, possibly the fruit of a nightshade or salt-bush.

Since photographing the Little Crow I have come to the conclusion that the species is fairly common in this district. —L. G. CHANDLER, Red Cliffs, Vic., 19/4/36.

**Parrots and Psittacosis.**—Although psittacosis has been known for some time to occur in Australian Parrots and has

been suspected in human beings, Drs. C. H. Ross and L. Rabinov, of Melbourne, report an epidemic of seven cases in human beings in the *Medical Journal of Australia* of March 14, and Dr. G. J. Kennedy, of Cobram, Victoria, reports one case, which they claim are the first in which definite bacteriological evidence of the virus was obtained. Dr. Kennedy's case was that of a woman who showed the virus in her sputum and whose Budgerigars also showed infection. All the other seven cases had been in close contact with Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, which had either been sick or had died. In all these the virus was shown to be present and that was the condition in at least one of the seven humans affected.

Without going deeply into the medical signs it may be said that the illness in human beings shows the features of typical broncho-pneumonia, commonly starting with influenza-like symptoms, malaise, severe headache, high temperature and sometimes diarrhoea, which may be blood-stained. None of the cases recorded in this series were fatal, but the disease can be. The illness may last several weeks. People who keep Cockatoos, Galahs, Rosellas, etc., often allow the bird to put its beak to their mouth, with a great risk of catching the disease. Investigation has shown that a large proportion of Australian Parrots, even in the wild state, carry the infection, to which, however, they become more or less immune. Those with aviaries who find their birds becoming sick and dying should take precautions in their way of handling them. Although this note is not altogether an ornithological one, I send it on account of its bearing on ornithology.—ERIC POCKLEY, Killara, N.S.W., 30/4/36.

**Aggressive Magpies.**—The aggressive tendencies of Magpies are too well recognized to excite a great deal of attention, and I have not been at all surprised to see Western Magpies (*Gymnorhina dorsalis*) attack boys and drive off large birds—Hawks, Eagles, Mopokes, Ravens and Grey Currawongs. I have two records, however, of particularly determined attacks not so easily explained, and, to my mind, rather curious. On April 15, 1934, I saw four Magpies, apparently a family party, attacking a Port Lincoln Parrot, which, being closely pursued, slipped away from them as I drew near. The Parrot, which flew feebly, was soon driven to earth by vicious pecks, but with difficulty escaped a second time, only to be forced down near a fence close by where I stood. The Magpies, seeing me, drew off, and I picked up the Parrot, more dead than alive, with its head raw and bleeding and its plumage much damaged. It was some time before it was sufficiently recovered to fly away. I am satisfied that, left to their own

devices, the Magpies would have killed the bird, which was past all resistance when I picked it up.

On September 8, 1935, I watched a Magpie pursue a Ground-Lark (Pipit). The Lark was hard put to it to avoid being struck, but finally escaped by reason of its quick turning ability.

In this district Magpies nest in August and September, the eggs being laid about the beginning of September.—E. H. SEDGWICK, Nangeenan, W.A., 22/5/36.

**Birds' Action on Proximity of Hawk.**—The value of a camera that does not require a visit after each exposure was again exemplified at the end of last season when the writer made some forty exposures at a nest of *Microeca fascians* one morning. He was well hidden in comfort, some sixty feet from the camera, and simply released the almost silent shutter whenever the bird's position seemed to warrant another picture. Well off the beaten track, and with no intruder in sight, bird life must have been fairly natural. The sitting bird was fed at long intervals by her mate, and also made frequent sallies into the sunshine to capture passing insects, shortly returning to the nest or some adjacent twig. Suddenly she darted from the nest straight into some thick shoots growing from a nearby sapling and disappeared. She remained there so long that a pair of glasses was focussed upon her. Her body was "jammed" tightly against the trunk, her head was turned up and outwards, and her wings hung down, so that it took a moment or two to recognize her. When it was realized that all other species had also disappeared and were silent, the cause was suspected, and presently a Hawk came into view sailing in ever-widening circles at no great height above the foliage. It passed over out of sight but there was still no trace of life, and a casual passer-by might well have commented upon the entire absence of birds. Almost within the writer's sight were the nests of four species, while half a dozen others used the immediate area for a feeding ground, yet there was neither sight nor sound to indicate the fact. Several minutes elapsed before the Hawk returned flying straight back along its route, and while still in sight, the birds reappeared as if by magic, and life on a sunny morning went on as before.

A similar instance occurred to the writer during boyhood when each bird screamed a warning and fled to cover. The pair of Sittellas (Tree-runners) that he was watching swung to the underside of a "stringy-bark" branch, and he well remembers that after seeing the Hawk pass by once, he bombarded the birds with sticks for some time before getting them to leave the shelter of the overhanging limb. Possibly their enemy passed the second time before they left.—J. S. RAMSAY, Sydney, N.S.W., 10/3/36.

**Jacana Notes.**—In his report on the Zoological Society's Expedition to the Zambesi (*Proc. Zoological Society*, 1928), Mr. H. B. Cott, B.A., has the following note concerning the African Jacana (*Actophilus africanus*):—

"When feeding, the Jacana may be seen pulling plants out of the water with a rapid motion of its bill and eagerly searching the under side of the leaves."

So far as I know, this feeding habit has not been recorded in the case of the Australian species. Each breeding territory of the Jacana, although limited in extent, seems to support an abundance of insect life and the bird finds an ample supply on the surface of the aquatic vegetation. In Cayley's *What Bird is that?* the food of the Jacana is given as "aquatic animals and plants." It would be interesting to know what the evidence is for "plants."

In *Country Life* (11/4/36) Mr. R. S. P. Bates contributes a letter concerning the Pheasant-tailed Jacana which inhabits the lotus-covered swamps of India. "The bird shown in my photograph," he writes, "had placed her nest most conveniently a few feet from the edge of a muddy spit running out into the water. I had no sooner put up the hiding tent than rain began to fall, so I returned later in the day when the weather had cleared. Imagine my surprise on finding that the bird, obviously mistrusting the new mud-covered mound so close to her, had actually made a new nest and conveyed the eggs across four yards of water to it."—N. L. ROBERTS, Homebush, N.S.W., 8/6/36.

**Birds and Caterpillars.**—In April, caterpillars known as "army worms" appeared in countless numbers in numerous coastal and inland districts in Queensland and New South Wales. In Queensland a government entomologist attributed the outbreak to the failure of a natural parasite to control the caterpillars, the natural balance of insect life having been upset temporarily by favourable weather conditions. In western districts of New South Wales caterpillars of the weed web moth caused considerable damage and Mr. W. B. Gurney, government entomologist, attributed their numbers to the abundance of weed growth promoted by frequent rains.

Birds play their part in maintaining a balance of insect life but, obviously, when some other limiting factor such as a parasite fails, or exceptional conditions are established temporarily, it is unreasonable to expect birds to do more than their share in controlling a plague of insects. Sprays, flame-throwers, rollers, ploughs, pigs, fowls, tar, and bags soaked in sump oil were all utilized in plans to destroy the caterpillars. That native birds did their "bit" also is proved by the following reference in country newspapers:—

*Coff's Harbour (N.S.W.).*—"Magpies especially have done an immense amount of good and on some of the farms they can be seen in groups all day long eating the caterpillars."

*Grafton (N.S.W.).*—"The magpie especially has done an immense amount of good eating the caterpillar."

*Goondiwindi (Qld.).*—"Crows are doing their best to diminish the numbers of caterpillars, but are in no way equal to the contest, and are looking pretty sick and fed up with the job."

*Boonah (Qld.).*—"Birds are gorging themselves, but make no appreciable impression on the numbers. An observer reports having seen a peewit unable to fly from the ground so great had been its consumption of caterpillars."

*Rockhampton (Qld.).*—"Native birds of the insectivorous species have proved their economic value during the caterpillar plague, and this has been demonstrated in a marked degree at Fitzroy Vale, a valuable fattening property of the Central Queensland Meat Export Co. Ltd., where the birds' timely intervention in destroying the grubs saved many acres of valuable grass. At Fitzroy Vale the caterpillars picked on a swamp couch grass paddock of about 5,000 acres on part of the run, and had stripped approximately 300 acres clean before the birds swooped down in thousands. For a fortnight countless birds, including ibises, cranes, redbills (water hens), plovers, native companions, magpies, butcher birds, and kookaburras ruthlessly attacked the invaders, and it was reported that at the week-end the birds had almost cleaned the property of caterpillars. The birds did not let up on their task during the period. At the first peep of dawn they were on the job and they did not cease the day's work until sundown. Keen observers say that the ibises put up the best tallies. Moving rows of caterpillars about half a mile long take some checking, but the birds went about the process in methodical style, and it was a common sight to see a long line of them not unlike military formation, with bills bobbing up and down in the swallowing process. Mr. Phil. Sowden, Manager of the Fitzroy Vale, said that if it had not been for the birds there was every likelihood of all the grass in the paddock being destroyed, and this would have retarded the fattening of bullocks and, consequently, meant considerable loss to the company."

*Scone (N.S.W.).*—"Insectivorous birds have had a good time. Crows, magpies and starlings appeared in hundreds, and it has been a common sight daily to see such large numbers of these birds at the one time, all with the one object in view. The insects are much in evidence yet, and are now attacking the grass paddocks. But the fight is on, and the birds are doing splendid work."

—N. L. ROBERTS, Homebush, N.S.W., 8/6/36.

**Random Notes.**—In November, 1935, H. Legge, whilst travelling by lorry across the "Big Moor" which lies between the Myall Lakes, N.S.W., and the coast, flushed two Ground Parrots (*Pezoporus wallicus*). These were the first seen by him for at least two years. The Emus are still living in that region, but I am afraid that now a track usable by motor cars has been found they will not long survive. Some motorists carry rifles and wantonly fire at the birds from the car. Foxes have found their way into the Myall Lakes district, and after their arrival the Curlews (*Burhinus magirostris*) have disappeared.

In a previous issue of *The Emu* it was asked why, if foxes caused the destruction of the Curlews, the Plovers held their



own. I think that is due to the fact that young Curlews are so helpless and the nest is generally on dry ground, whereas the Plovers frequently nest in marshy ground, which is distasteful to the fox, and the young are more agile.

During August, 1935, Millers' Forest, a farming district near Raymond Terrace, was visited by Catbirds (*Ailurædus crassirostris*), which no inhabitant remembered seeing there before. Of the original forest only a few brush trees are left, and in no case were there more than two together. After staying a few weeks the birds disappeared as suddenly as they came, and no satisfactory conjecture has been made as to their appearance in open country where no Catbird had been seen for at least sixty years.

Last month we had unexpected visitors in the shape of a pair of Jacanas (*Irediparra gallinacea*). They took up their abode on Marriott's Swamp near East Maitland, nested and hatched out four young. None of the local people remember their being seen there before.

On a swamp on the edge of the town of West Maitland a number of "Red-bills"\* took up their abode last winter and nested in the spring. The old birds were not disturbed, but when the young appeared a Spotted Harrier (*Circus assimilis*) immediately gave them attention. The old birds, by flapping their wings and splashing water, endeavoured to frighten it away, but failed. All the young would have been taken had not a local resident, who had been endeavouring to protect them and other water fowl on the swamp, shot the Harrier. This month (February) another Harrier appeared and commenced depredations.—W. J. ENWRIGHT, West Maitland, N.S.W., 10/3/36.

\* Presumably *Porphyrio melanotus*.—Ed.

**Bristle-bird near N.S.W.-Vic. Border.**—In *The Emu*, vol. xxxv, at page 321, A. H. Chisholm comments on the paucity of notes on the Eastern Bristle-bird (*Dasyornis brachypterus*).

During October, 1935, whilst travelling via the coast road and camping between Melbourne and Sydney, every opportunity to study bird-life was taken, a particular watch being made for the Bristle-bird and for the Ground Parrot (*Pezoporus wallicus*). It was not until the return journey, however, that any trace of either bird was discovered. While still in N.S.W., and about 10 miles from the Victorian border, a signpost, pointing down a narrow rough track to Womboyne Inlet, was noticed. A decision to inspect the inlet was quickly made and after travelling eight miles along the rough track the inlet was reached and camp pitched for the night. At the only permanent habitation, the information that the Ground Parrot could be seen in the scrub fringing the inlet was obtained, but the informant knew nothing of the Bristle-bird. The Ground Parrot was not seen, however, but the

next day, whilst I was sitting quietly in some thick scrub, a bird call that was new to me sounded close by, and, within a few seconds, the caller came hopping into view. Identification of the bird as the Eastern Bristle-bird was not difficult, the short rounded wings and the peculiar fine feathering being very noticeable.

Although the undergrowth was extremely dense it did not prevent the bird from moving with surprising agility. While the bird was in view another was heard calling, but an extensive search failed to disclose any signs of the bird or of a nest. Unfortunately, a further search was impossible as we had to leave the next day.—J. J. BRYANT, Balwyn, Vic., 9/6 36.

## Library Notes

The following additions to the Library are acknowledged:  
*Australian Science Abstracts*, Vol. 15, No. 1.

*Golf Clubs as Bird Sanctuaries*. Publication of the National Association of Audubon Societies. Deals with the desirability of encouraging birds around golf courses. Contains many photographs of birds and nesting boxes, short notes on species included, and general notes and suggestions.

*The Victorian Naturalist*, Vol. lii, No. 12, Vol. liii, No. 1. Latter contains "Some Notes on the Lyrebird," by R. T. Littlejohns, "The Future of the Lyrebird in Victoria," by F. Lewis, and "Lyrebirds of Three States," by A. H. Chisholm.

*The Avicultural Magazine*, 5th Ser., Vol. i, Nos. 3, 4 and 5.

*The Wilson Bulletin*, Vol. xlviii, No. 1.

*Annals of the Transvaal Museum*, Vol. xviii, Part 3. Contains "Ornithological Notes," by Dr. Austin Roberts.

*Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution for 1934*. Contains "Curious and Beautiful Birds of Ceylon," by Casey A. Wood.

*Birds of the Charleston Mountains, Nevada*. By A. J. Van Rossem. Pacific Coast Avifauna, No. 24 (Cooper Ornithological Club).

*How to Know British Birds*. By Norman H. Joy. See review in this part.

*The Auk*, Vol. liii, No. 2. Contains "The Formenkreis-Theory," by Prof. Erwin Stresemann; "The Number of Contour Feathers in Passeriform and Related Birds," by Alexander Wetmore; "The Bar-tailed Godwit and its Races," by Leonidas Partenko.

*The Birds of Nippon*, Vol. 1, Part 5, by Prince Takatsukasa. See review in this part.

*The South Australian Ornithologist*, Vol. xiii, Parts 5 and 6. Part 5 is devoted to "Notes on the Albatrosses occurring in South Australian Waters," by H. T. Condon. Seven out of the eight Australian species recorded. Two are sight