

Photography in the Swamps : The Little Grassbird

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The majority of bird-lists that include the Little Grassbird (*Megalurus gramineus*) contain a reference to its melancholy notes being more in evidence than the bird itself. It is certainly an elusive species and, in order to become properly acquainted with it, one must put in a good deal of patient and quiet watching. Generally speaking it is considered a relatively-uncommon bird, but lack of detailed observation has fostered that impression. The types of locality it inhabits lend themselves to concealment, the species is shy and protectively-coloured, and the proximity of the habitat to water, which is almost invariable, makes observing somewhat difficult. Doubtless many people living in the vicinity of areas where it occurs, and knowing its notes, are not familiar with the bird itself. In my opinion the bird, although shy, is not alarmed at the nearness of humans, and, after an initial scurrying away through the grass and rushes, will usually come quickly back through the undergrowth when all is quiet again.

It has been said that the name Grassbird is a misnomer. The type of grass associated with the bird is not that of paddock or pasture, however, but the rank herbage of the swamp-sides, where tussocky grass is abundant. The species is often found away from such situations, being equally at home near fresh or salt water, and favourite haunts are dreary samphire flats. Grassbirds are particularly common on Mud Island, Victoria, where large tracts are samphire-covered.

The Grassbird becomes very silent during autumn and winter months, leading to the belief, once occasionally expressed, that it wanders away from its nesting haunts. There may be a spreading out to some small extent—by young birds seeking new territory, or from lagoons and swamps that dry out entirely—but, on the whole, few birds are so local and stationary. The Grassbird is a very weak flyer, flight being almost confined to short movements from one tussock of reeds to another, or occasionally low over the water across pond or lagoon. The wings are drooped and flight appears to be performed with effort.

Attention to the calls of Grassbirds discloses more variation than is usually realized. Whilst watching birds around lagoons at Bulleen, last year, and waiting near nests where I was photographing, I found that two birds, at least, had tones by which they could be distinguished immediately, one, in particular, having a "voice" much lower and fuller

Photo. by C. E. Bryant.

Little Grassbird at nest.



in tone than the usual notes. The pitch of the response of a bird calling back to another is frequently higher than the notes of the first bird, this undoubtedly being a sex distinction, but the differences I refer to were not in this category. I believe that the female often answers from the nest. Grassbirds will answer readily if their notes are at all skilfully mimicked, although the persistence of their whistling might often make a listener consider that what is mere coincidence is an answer. They will also come around readily, curious to see who or what is calling to them. In addition to the well-known, plaintive, usually-treble note, Grassbirds have a characteristic scolding note, used largely when they are alarmed, when their young are hidden in the tussocks and they are concerned about them, and when nest-building is commencing and, presumably, mating is taking place. At this last stage pairs of birds chase each other from clump to clump of grass, hang on to reed or rush stems and indulge in obvious courting actions. They face each other, droop and flutter the wings and utter the chattering call. The plaintive notes are claimed to be ventriloquial in effect, but are not, I think, so marked by that aspect as is often assumed.

The Grassbird's nest is one of the cosiest and deepest to be found, and eggs and young birds are thus well protected. Usually nests are built very close above the water level, although I have seen them up to five or six feet high. At Heidelberg last year one was built in tree-violet (*Hymenanthera*) at about four feet above the ground, on a sloping bank, and surrounded by briar roses. Rushes, reeds, grass tussocks, the bases of willow suckers and of swamp tea-tree growths form the usual nesting sites, the nests being usually securely fastened to stems or fine twigs, although sometimes wedged into position rather than affixed. Extensive lining, largely of feathers, is carried out, and the great majority of the nests are "finished off" with a couple of large feathers, usually the bluish ones, of the Swamp-hen. These feathers, a feature so often referred to relative to Grassbird nests, are usually placed shaft down inside the nest so that the top ends curl over and form a sheltering hood. Such feathers are plainly visible in the accompanying photograph, although there they have been misplaced a trifle by the young birds. The feathers are easily procurable, as the two species are nearly always found together. Moorhen and Black Duck feathers are sometimes used, and I have read of plumes of the Black-tailed Native-hen being found in such a connection.

Some accounts refer to the nest as being domed, with an entrance near the top, but seldom, I think, is any roof, other than arching feathers, built. The brooding bird does not

sit tight, as a rule, but, having left the nest, will come back and fuss around it a good deal, with little delay. Despite that, Grassbird homes are not always easy to find, as they are often placed well into the centre of large clumps of rushes growing in the water, and are always well-concealed. I have seen nests in thick boxthorn close to the water's edge and was told of another built in collected debris against a fence post in the water.

I do not think that both birds brood. At nests I have watched it always appeared to be the one bird that brought food to the nestlings, and at a nest at which I spent a number of hours, on each of several occasions, last season, watching and photographing, I am certain that such was the case. The male (assumed) would not come into the clump of rushes where the nest was located. He could invariably be brought up to another clump nearby, by my whistling. Then he would fly hurriedly past the nest with the usual laboured flight, alighting some yards farther along the pond. The process was then reversed and the forwards and backwards flight kept up continuously whilst the hen was near the nest. He appeared to call her away on several occasions. The hen had a much abraded tail—from sitting in the confined space of the nest, I assumed.

In feeding the young the bird returned to the nest at about five-minute intervals. Small whitish caterpillars were much in evidence as food. Excreta from the nestlings was removed at about every fourth visit. Approach to the nest was invariably made from the side farthest from the camera of the extensive clump of rushes, and advantage was taken of all the cover possible. There was no hesitation at the nest, but a prompt delivery of the food, a quick seizure of excreta on some occasions, and instant disappearance into the surrounding herbage.

The young birds, when they leave the nest, are experts at concealment, and, although it is often apparent, from the action of the adults, that the young are hidden nearby, the latter are not easily found if they sit tight, as usually they do.

Grassbirds evidently have two broods. Most pairs in a given locality appear to nest almost all at the same time. Then there is apparently a brief period of a week or so whilst little nesting takes place, followed by the second brooding, for which new nests are built. The nesting season extends from September to December, sometimes being both a little earlier and later.

The Fan-tailed Cuckoo occasionally imposes on the Grassbird.