

## Nest "Borrowing" amongst Birds

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It seems probable that instances of birds making use of the nests of others occur quite frequently. At least three species—the Blue-faced Honeyeater, White-breasted Wood-Swallow, and Large-billed Scrub-Wren—regularly re-line deserted nests of other species and use them to rear their own broods. Isolated records of individual pairs extend the number of species noted as acting in this way. To my mind the most remarkable of these records is that of a Frogmouth making use of an old nest of an Apostle-bird (*Struthidea cinerea*). However, the point is that these are instances of a bird making use of a *deserted* nest. Less common are cases of birds "taking over" partly-completed nests, or even nests containing eggs, driving off the rightful owners, and settling down to raise their family without all the tiresome bother of constructing a cradle. During the present (1941) season I have noted several such cases which may be of interest.

On July 17, 1941, I found an almost completed nest of Zebra Finches in an orange tree. Just when it seemed ready for eggs the birds deserted, and, although they remained around the garden, took no further interest in the nest. Thinking they might return as the season advanced, I temporarily forgot them. Then, on October 1, I found that Eastern Whitefaces had a nest, containing three eggs, built in a grain elevator box on an old, disused header. Several days later I saw a female House-Sparrow fly from the elevator, and on investigating saw that the nest now contained two Sparrow's eggs as well as the three of the Whiteface. My opportunity of observing the outcome was lost, for when I told of the occurrence, one of the children in the house destroyed the nest "to get even with the Sparrow." On October 15 I was told that the Finches were back at their nest in the orange tree. But, whoever heard of Zebra Finches giving their nest a thick lining of feathers, or laying red-spotted eggs? The Whitefaces had found another nest!

I set up a hide and prepared to photograph the birds. One afternoon the Finches appeared on the scene. Apparently they had decided the time had come to resume operations. As they approached the nest, which now contained newly-hatched young, the Whitefaces arrived, and, with lowered, pointed heads and fluffed-out feathers, drove the "usurpers" away. The Finches then systematically set about removing the nest. While the male kept watch from a nearby fence, the female approached along the ground, darted swiftly up

to the back of the nest, and drew out a grass stem with which it flew into a peach tree a few yards away. This was repeated a number of times each day, but whenever the Whitefaces came near, the male Finch beat a strategic retreat, calling loudly, and the female hastily followed. This went on day after day, until the Finches had a stout foundation built in the peach tree, and by the time the Whitefaces were ready to leave their nest little remained of it apart from the feather lining.

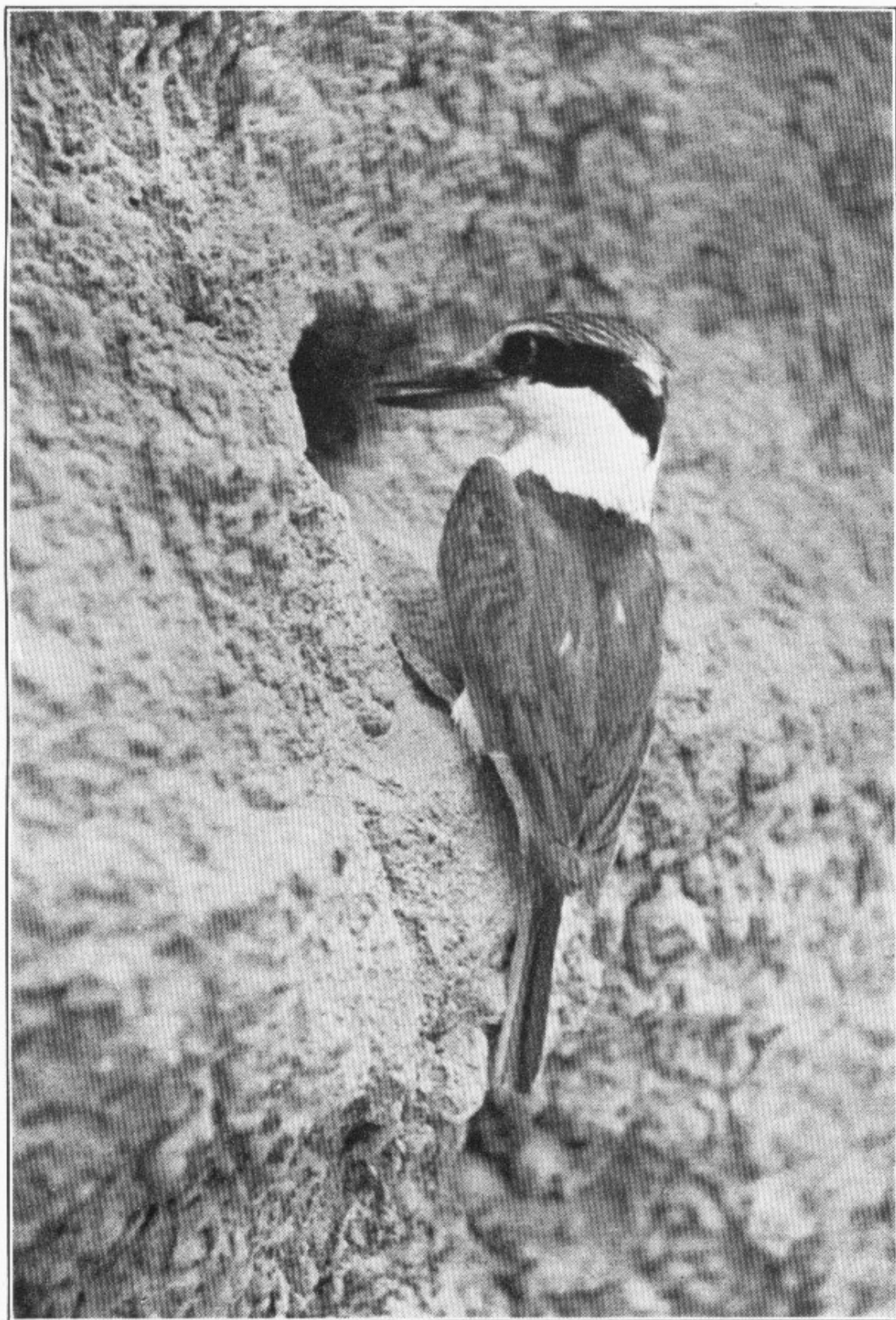
Late in the afternoon of October 11, 1941, I saw a pair of White-backed Swallows enter a hole in the bank of a dried-up creek. A dummy camera was set up and moved in day by day, and I was delighted to see that the birds took no notice of it, so prepared to photograph them. The rest of the story of that nest can be taken from my notes:

"Nov. 10.—When I arrived at nest 117 to-day a Red-backed Kingfisher flew out. Three white eggs could be seen in the nest.

"Nov. 12.—There were young in the 'Swallow-Kingfisher' nest to-day. The adult Kingfisher posed well.

"Nov. 17.—When I visited nest 117 this afternoon, for the first time since 12th, it had been raided by a goanna, which had scratched it out and taken the young. Apparently very few Kingfishers are reared here, for every nest I have found has ended in this way. The lizards seem to leave the young until they are fairly well advanced; the same is the case with those of the Rainbow-bird population which choose to tunnel into level ground. When the young are almost fully fledged they are taken by either goannas or foxes, and the predator does not bother to dig out the whole burrow, but merely scratches down directly on to the nestlings. This would seem to indicate that the culprit is a fox, for these animals search out young rabbits in the same way."

Apart from those two records I can offer little. As recorded in an earlier *Emu* (Oct., 1941), I have known a Zebra Finch make use of one of the nests of a colony of Fairy Martins, and there are records of House-Sparrows and Striated Pardalotes acting in a similar manner. A further instance, recorded in the "Outdoor Australia" page of the *Sydney Mail* rather more than ten years ago, concerned a struggle between Mistletoe-birds and "Tomtits" for possession of the latter's nest. I find it difficult to envisage a Mistletoe-bird preferring the bulky structure of *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa* (the species most generally known as "tomtit") to its own dainty creation. Possibly the "tits" in question were *A. nana* or *A. lineata*, or even *Smicrornis brevirostris*.



Red-backed Kingfisher at nesting tunnel.

Photo. by P. A. Bourke.