

Further Notes on Vocal Mimicry

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My supplementary note on vocal mimicry among birds, as given in *The Emu* for August, 1949 (p. 60), was written without sufficient attention to references, for I find now that errors of omission occurred. Species to be added to the list of mimics, either definitely or tentatively, are the Northern Logrunner or Chowchilla (*Orthonyx spaldingi*), Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (*Acanthagenys rufogularis*), Buff-breasted Scrub-Wren (*Sericornis lœvigaster*), Striated Thornbill (*Acanthiza lineata*), Western Silvereye (*Zosterops australasica*), and Rufous Shrike-Thrush (*Colluricincla megarrhyncha*).

Reference to mimicry by the Logrunner is made in a discussion of birds of the Atherton Tablelands, northern Queensland (*Emu*, vol. 47, p. 104), by P. A. Bourke and A. F. Austin, the former of whom has at other times written revealingly of mimicry on the part of the Bush-Lark and the Pipit. The dual authors say that *O. spaldingi* has considerable mimetic ability, which appears to be exercised only during its brief periods of inactivity, a point that tallies with records for various other species. (Incidentally, their allusion to the "many strange notes" used by the Logrunner recalls that in Brisbane 30-odd years ago a man from Atherton told me that the species was known to settlers as the 'Auctioneer-bird,' because it was forever chattering, and the 'Chowchilla,' because its chief cry was 'Chowchilla-chow-chow, chowy-chook-chook, chowy-chook-chook.' I passed on this information to the late Dr. J. A. Leach, who took a fancy to the name 'Chowchilla' and adopted it, in the *Official Checklist* of 1926, for both species of *Orthonyx*, although, of course, the voice of the smaller species, *O. temminckii*, the 'spinetail' and 'scrub-hen' of settlers in coastal southern Queensland and New South Wales, is not at all in accord with the name.)

The Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater is put forward as a mimic by A. R. McGill of Sydney, who in a paper on birds of north-western New South Wales (*Emu*, 44, p. 61), has written—"I am not aware that this species has previously been recorded as a mimic, but on a few occasions I heard it give a fine repertoire of notes in which the calls of the Grey Thrush and Oriole could be clearly distinguished from those of many others." If those last two words mean 'many other species,' it is regrettable that the birds imitated were not named, for, apart from the fact that the mimetic record is new, mimicry on the part of any of the honeyeaters proper, if it occurs at all, seems to be extremely rare. The Spiny-cheek, of course, has many gurgling 'natural'

notes, but one must do Mr. McGill the credit of assuming that he did not err in detecting mimicry in the calls which he heard.

The Buff-breasted Scrub-Wren and Striated Thornbill are added to the list by E. A. R. Lord, of Murphy's Creek, Queensland. In a letter to me in 1946 Mr. Lord said he had heard a Scrub-Wren, which was resting among debris in a creek-bed, give in a whisper-song perfect imitations of the Yellow Robin and the Spine-billed Honeyeater; and on another occasion he heard a Striated Thornbill, which also was resting alone, repeatedly mingle imitations of the notes of the Yellow Robin with its own calls. In the same letter Mr. Lord pays a warm tribute to the mimetic powers of the handsome Pied Butcher-bird—he says he once heard two adults and two young birds mimicking in company the notes of some twenty species, including the Boobook Owl and the Owlet-Nightjar—and he acclaims also the imitative talent of the tiny Mistletoe-bird, which he has known to use mimicry of eleven species.

More recently (Sep., 1949) Mr. Lord has written expressing regret at my reluctance to recognize the Yellow-tailed Thornbill as other than a 'possible.' "It does deserve a place among true mimics," he says, "for it can imitate quite well, as I know from several experiences." My doubt on the point was due to the fact that although the 'Tomtit' is widespread and familiar it has not been reported as a mimic by anyone except Mr. Lord. If his record be accepted, together with that of the Striated Thornbill, the number of species of Thornbills now recognized as mimics is seven, and, with the addition of the Buff-breasted Scrub-Wren, the number of *Sericornis* known to use imitations is four.

Eric Sedgwick, writing to me from Caron, W.A., in 1947, reports that he heard a Western Silvereye imitating well, in a whisper-song, on a day in winter, the voices of the Pallid Cuckoo, Rufous Whistler, and Magpie-Lark. Since there is some ground for supposing the Western Silvereye to merit only subspecific rank, Mr. Sedgwick's record may be merged with those from eastern Australia (where the common Silvereye has frequently been acclaimed as a competent mimic), but, at least, it is interesting to have a note on mimicry in *Zosterops* from the West.

Mrs. Herbert Curtis (Miss Hilda Geissmann), who has had much experience with the jungle birds of Tamborine Mountain, southern Queensland, is responsible for the addition of that dulcet-voiced songster, the Rufous Shrike-Thrush, to the list. She says it is a practice on her part to whistle for the household dog five times (always the same way) each evening, and a Thrush in the neighbouring jungle has acquired the whistle, evidently being impressed

by the sound in the silence of the night. "He can," says Mrs. Curtis, "whistle this exactly as I do, only in a richer, purer tone than I could hope to use. It is not a natural call with the Red Thrush." That action of the bird's in adopting Mrs. Curtis's whistle is, one may add, merely poetic justice, for in other years the lady herself was much given to imitating, not with a whistle but vocally, the "Tu-whee, wot-wot-wot," of her beloved 'Red Thrush.'

Another interesting note from Mrs. Curtis relates to a Satin Bower-bird near her home that imitated the laughing scream of a skylarking boy immediately it was uttered. This tallies with an additional report from Queensland (sent me by Miss D. McCulloch) of a Spotted Bower-bird that imitated faithfully the voices of three talkative women, a mother and two daughters, whom it frequently heard as it sat in a tree near the house. Are there any other records of wild Bower-birds imitating the human voice?

While on the subject of Bower-birds, a reference may be given to a note overlooked in my booklet *Nature's Linguists* (1946) in relation to *Chlamydera cerviniventris*, the Fawn-breasted Bower-bird of the far north. It is true that W. D. MacGillivray and H. G. Barnard, both experienced ornithologists, failed to hear any mimicry from the species, but this was detected long before their day—John Macgillivray stated in his *Voyage of H.M.S. Rattlesnake* (1852) that he heard a member of the species at Cape York "imitating the notes of various other birds, especially the *Tropidodorkhynchus*." Accordingly, it is desirable to remove the Fawn-breasted Bower-bird from the 'possibles' to the 'definites' among mimics, and to add that, as the curious Regent Bower-bird has also been shown (once) to have imitative ability, all eight Australian members of the group are now so 'listed,' most of them being master mockers. It would be interesting to learn if similar talents are possessed by all, or any number, of the bower-birds of New Guinea.

Including the six species mentioned in the first paragraph of the present note, and also the Yellow-tailed Thornbill (but still omitting the Pied Currawong, Tawny Frogmouth, Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo, and White-plumed Honey-eater, which have been tentatively sponsored by various contributors to *The Emu*), we now have a list of fifty-three Australian birds which have been known to practise, with varying degrees of consistency, the art of vocal mimicry.

The Editor invites contributions, especially of detailed field-observations.