



Male Blue Wren about to feed young.



Snake removing Blue Wren chick from nest before swallowing it.

Photos. by John Warham.

The Blue Wren: Courtship Feeding and Predation by Snake

By JOHN WARHAM, Melbourne, Vic.

Passing through South Australia between October 17 and 26, 1957, my wife and I frequently encountered the Superb Blue Wren (*Maturus cyaneus*) and the nesting of a pair watched at close quarters near the Coorong provided incidents that seem worth recording.

The nest was discovered on October 23 and held two small chicks and an egg. It was built in a clump of rushes about one foot from the ground amid an area of acacia-clothed sand-dunes.

Only a single pair of Wrens was in attendance, although we had seen two supernumerary males at another nest in Adelaide a few days previously. The birds were tame and made no attempt at diversionary display when the nest was approached. The female was brooding, being fed at intervals by her mate while she continued to sit. Less often she flew from the nest at his approach and may have been fed on those occasions too. Both when sitting and when out of the nest, the female quivered her wings rapidly before being fed, behaving just like a *Parus* titmouse during courtship feeding. The male responded not only by placing his food in her opened bill but also by puffing out the blue feather patches on his cheeks and slightly raising the crown feathers; this gave him a very round-faced appearance.

Only the male was noted singing. He used a 'reeling' song usually preceded by four or five clear piping notes that seemed analagous to the trill of *M. splendens* (Warham, *Emu*, 54, 134). The female confined her vocal efforts to a soft 'scripp', and this usually in response to the male's call.

On the afternoon of October 24, I heard a new note. This was a harsh call uttered from well up in the bushes and at the same time the adults stopped coming to the nest. This calling, using a single hard note, went on for about five minutes until I suddenly saw a snake's lithe body 'pouring' into the nest and then withdrawing with a chick in its mouth. The chick was promptly swallowed and once it had passed down the reptile's body the latter (probably a brown snake, *Demansia textilis*), slid back to remove the second chick which it again ate once the snake's head was outside the nest. The predator then made its unhurried departure and was lost to sight.

The parent birds continued to call, however, although they had made no attempt to interfere. Some ten minutes later, when I emerged from the hide, I found that the snake had been dozing behind the nest and once it finally disappeared the Wrens' excitement eased and the female returned to her nest. Here she probed about restlessly and presently sat down

on the remaining egg—presumably an infertile one. The male appeared, too, his bill full of food, and peered all around for the young, looking both inside the nest and outside and to the rear of it. Eventually he swallowed the food himself. The female continued to sit most of the afternoon and occasionally left to collect food. Later in the evening I saw both sexes bring in food simultaneously and again search diligently for the vanished chicks. That evening neither roosted in the nest and by the following morning they appeared to have abandoned it.

A Distribution Study of the South-Polar Skua

By CARL R. EKLUND, Washington, U.S.A.

In conjunction with activities being carried out in the Antarctic during the International Geophysical Year of 1957-8, a banding study has been undertaken to determine more about the Skua (*Catharacta skua*). Ornithologists disagree on the systematic treatment of the bipolar forms of the genus *Catharacta*. The South-polar Skua (*C. s. maccormicki*) appears to be the common breeding bird on the Antarctic Continent. A banding study of this subspecies should help to solve some of the questions on its distribution and relationship with other recognized forms.

Six nations including Argentina, the United Kingdom, Japan, Norway, the U.S.S.R., and the United States are banding at sixteen stations, and Chile and France have agreed to carry out observations at certain of their stations. Australia, which had already been using a coloured band at Mawson Station prior to this study, will also band at its Vestfold Hills Station. New Zealand is carrying out joint banding studies with the United States at two stations.

Multi-coloured, unnumbered, one and one-half inch wide thermoplastic leg bands are being used. The material is manufactured of rubber-styrene under the trade name of Boltaron, and is similar to, but heavier than, that being used successfully in neck-band markers for geese by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The bands were given limited testing at the U.S. National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C., on Skuas which were taken in the Antarctic in 1955.

Seven basic colours, which are readily distinguished from each other in the field, are being used. To provide a sufficient number of different colours for each of the sixteen stations a dual colour was obtained with some by applying a vinyl-based paint suitable for thermoplastics to one-half of the band. Vinyl plastic, pressure-sensitive adhesive tape of the same colour as the thermoplastic material, is applied over the band to ensure retention.