



The Paperbark Teatree (Melaleuca) Pucca

Photo by N. F. Chaffin, R. A. O. E., Victoria Ave., Willoughby, N.S.W.

## Birds of a Melaleuca Patch

By N. CHAFFER and H. WOLSTENHOLME, M.S.R.A.O.U.

On 18th October a day was spent near St. Mary's, a small township about 30 miles west of Sydney, on the flat country, not far from the Blue Mountains. Conspicuous in a large cleared area containing dead trees and a great many stumps, where Brown Treecreepers (*Climacteris picumna*) were plentiful, and where there were hardly any other living trees, stood a little clump of Paper-barks (*Melaleuca leucodendron*)—oasis-like, with thick green foliage and deep cool shade. Some two dozen shapely trees, about twenty-five feet high, were growing close together in an irregular oval that could be placed inside a tennis court. It looked a good place for birds, and before we reached it we could see a bird gathering hair from the back of a cow standing under the trees. This was found to be a Fuscous Honeyeater (*Meliphaga fusca*), and it flew off with a mouthful of hair to its nest in course of construction in a sapling some distance away. We spent a great part of the afternoon lounging in the cool shade of the trees and observing their bird occupants. Very strangely those whose nests were found were all black and white birds, five species in all. Magpie-Larks (*Grallina cyanoleuca*) and Black and White Fantails, or Wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) had their nests within six feet of each other in the same tree, as is often the case. A few trees off a Scissors Grinder or Restless Flycatcher (*Seisura inquieta*) was sitting closely on a nest and three eggs, about twenty-five feet up. An attempt was made to photograph this bird. The camera was lashed to a branch near the nest, and a line dropped to the ground from the shutter release. The bird, however, proved very timid, and did not once pay a visit during the two hours the camera faced the nest, though it kept in the vicinity all the time.

In another tree close by, busy making their nest in a fork on a horizontal branch, was a pair of White-shouldered Caterpillareaters (*Campephaga tricolor*). Rather slim birds they are, like Honeyeaters in build, and very handsome when seen closely. The pure white of the male—all the under surface right to the eye and beak, shoulders also and upper wing—is very striking, especially if the bird is above one, when the black (in some lights greenish) of the crown and top of back is hardly visible. The female is of a showy brown colour, with pretty markings, especially on the wings, and fainter markings on the buffy white under surface. The pair seemed happy and affectionate, and they had attractive ways. They were always in company when gathering material, and were quite close together when arranging

it at the nest, a small shallow structure. The male would at times stroke his mate's back with his bill. Leaving the nest, they would float away gently (like a Wood-Swallow) with wings outstretched and motionless, uttering the while a sweet canary-like song. These happy, domestic proceedings were rudely interrupted by the arrival on the scene of a second female bird, and for fully a quarter of an hour a strenuous fight went on between the two brown birds. They made quite a disturbance among the other bird occupants as they chased each other from tree to tree. Sometimes they dropped to the ground locked together, and wrestling there like two sparrows, while little bits of fluff floated away; sometimes they rested a moment and panted, with mouths agape, as they eyed each other for the next attack. The male took no part in the affair beyond following the two female birds closely wherever they went. Eventually the intruder flew off, and the nest-building was resumed.

The fifth black and white bird was the Hooded Robin (*Melanodryas cucullata*). In coloration the male bird is similar to the male Caterpillar-eater, but the whole throat and head of the Robin is black, while in general appearance it is a typical Robin. In flight, when viewed from the rear, the two birds offer a close resemblance. The female is a kind of ashy colour, under surface lighter. On the wing the male is a pretty sight, especially if flying away from one, when the moving wings and the blending of the black and white produce a beautiful effect. These birds had a nest in the first fork of a large Paper-bark, about seven feet from the ground, in a position that was shaded and awkward to photograph. One large young bird was in the nest and another was found dead on the ground below. The nest was larger and less compact than those of other Robins. We were surprised to see two male birds gathering food for the young bird. One was sleeker and more handsome than the other. One often fluttered about the ground a little distance from us, with feathers ruffled, apparently to divert our attention from the nest. Sometimes, it would drop vertically to the ground in a seemingly helpless manner from a branch, and flutter around the base of the tree, pausing occasionally to see what effect its manoeuvres had upon us. Both male birds kept together a good deal, and were on the friendliest of terms.

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