

Habits of the Silvereye

By MRS. A. S. WILKINSON, Kapiti Island, N.Z.

The coming of the Silvereyes (*Zosterops halmaturina*) to New Zealand about seventy-five years ago, puts them into a distinct class as self-introduced birds, and gives them an interesting individuality. The flight of 1200 miles across the Tasman Sea from Australia seems an amazing performance for such small frail-looking birds to have accomplished. However, it was a satisfactory venture, for our country seems to suit them very well, and they have increased so much in those years, that now it may be said that they are one of our commonest birds. They have spread over both the North and the South Islands, as well as to most, if not all, of the smaller out-lying islands. They keep generally to the more open or lightly-bushed country and the populated areas, preferring manuka land and scrub to the heavy forest, although they are to be found there, too. Of a restless disposition, they are real little nomads and explorers. Plentiful in a certain locality for a few weeks, or even months, their numbers gradually diminish till only a few remain. They move about in flocks of varying sizes, and their call notes as they fly may be heard from a long distance.

Here on Kapiti Island they become very scarce in the late spring and in the summer-time, but usually in the winter they are about in great numbers. In 1928 they were especially numerous at that season and grew very tame, coming round the house and even venturing inside. They appear to suffer greatly from hunger, and, with a little encouragement, they may be enticed to feed from the hand. I have had as many as seven of these pretty little creatures feeding on a piece of cake, struggling for a place on my hand. Though insects, nectar, fruit and berries are their regular diet, in the cold season they will eat almost any soft food such as bread and milk, cake, suet, butter, etc., and they are very fond of syrup made of sugar and water. When food is scarce I have seen them round the garbage bucket, picking at potato and apple peelings; they will also eat meat and drink milk. For such small birds they have large appetites and eat these foods in a greedy manner, gulping down huge mouthfuls. Here, as the breeding time advances they become less and less plentiful, until but a very few are left, and these lose their tame and trustful ways and slip away secretly, each pair to choose its building site.

The males have a very pleasing little song, not often heard, and varying much in volume in individual birds—some singing almost inaudibly, others much louder—but their song does not seem to be an indication that they are

wooing their mates, or one of triumph, for it is just as likely to be heard in the winter as in the breeding season.

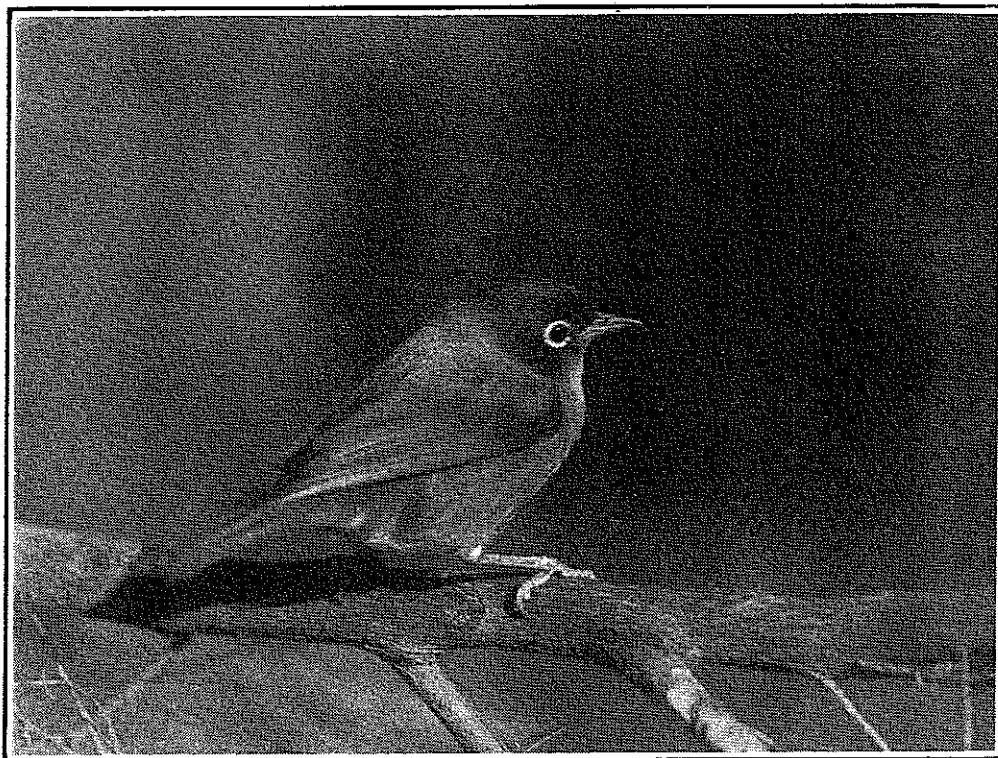
It is very difficult to tell from the manner of the Silvereyes if they are building, and it is only by careful watching that they can be tracked to their nests, so quiet and unbusinesslike are their actions. These are the furtive habits of the Silvereyes on Kapiti during summer; on the mainland they do not appear to be secretive, and years ago, in Nelson, I used to find their dainty little nests without much trouble. But, although so careful not to reveal any clue to aid the discovery of their little home, they cannot be said to be timid birds whilst their nest is under observation, and they will carry on with their domestic duties with quiet unconcern.

If unduly alarmed, they call in a distressful manner, their notes sounding much like, "O-dear, o-dearie," repeated very mournfully. Unlike many birds, the Silvereye does not appear to come back to the same locality each season to nest, though it may have two nests near together in the same season.

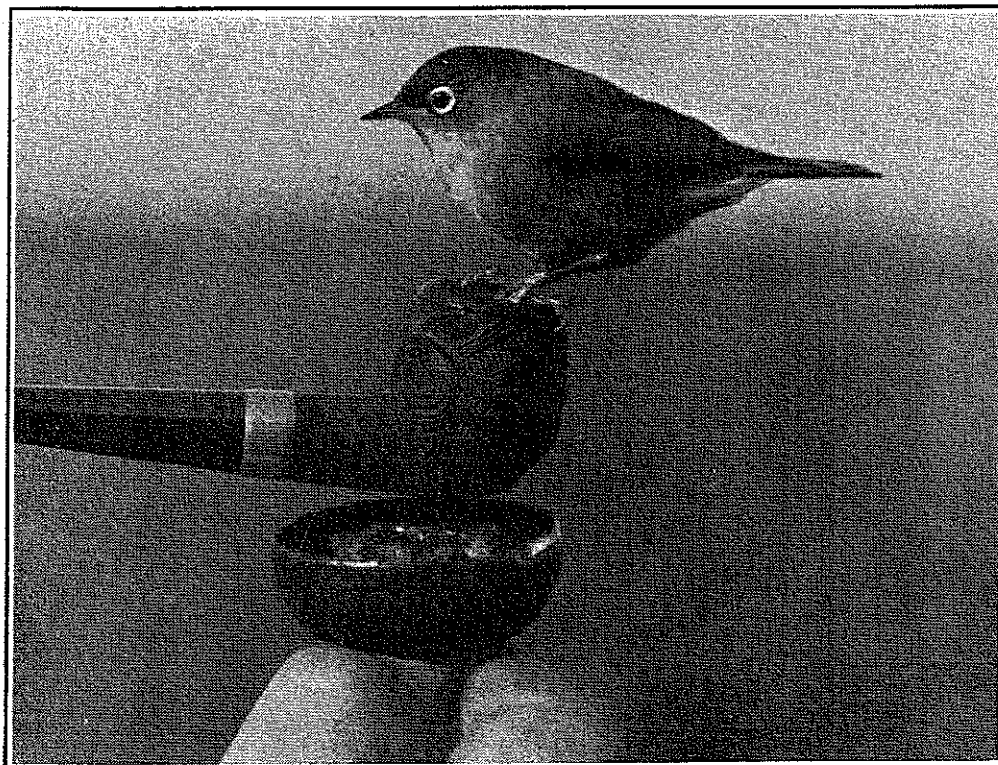
The cup-shaped nest is suspended by the rim between the forks of slender twigs, and in this way differs from nests of other birds of our bush, the usual method being to support the nest by the branch or branches underneath. The chief building materials used are soft dry grass blades, moss, thistle-down and horsehair, these being woven very neatly to form an inconspicuous cup. Manuka (*Leptospermum*) and tauhinu (*Cassinia*) are most often chosen in this locality, and the nest is usually not higher than six or seven feet from the ground.

Watching a pair of Silvereyes building, I noticed that both birds were carrying material and both working equally hard; no doubt this is the custom of others. They were very quiet about their work, giving but a low note as they flew away for another load. At another nest I saw that both birds brought food to their young, but that one bird was much braver than the other at approaching the nest with the lens of the camera not more than $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet away. The eggs are of a beautiful pale blue, without spots or markings of any kind, and the usual clutch seems to be three. The period of incubation is only about ten days, and the young occupy the nest for just about the same length of time. After that they are probably fed by their parents for another ten days, but, unfortunately, the fledglings I had under observation, after a day or two spent in the vicinity of the nest, evidently became strong enough on the wing to depart to some distance, and so I lost sight of them.

Silvereyes have pretty, affectionate ways, and will sit cuddled close together on a branch, much in the fashion of young birds, as though for warmth, often combing each other's feathers with their beaks, in a caressing manner,



Silvereye.



Silvereye on caretaker's pipe, Kapiti Island.

Photos. by Mrs. A. S. Wilkinson, R.A.O.U.

like a pair of Australian love-birds (*Melopsittacus undulatus*). The ones behaving in this way are most likely a mated pair. Silvereyes can also be very quarrelsome, and sometimes fight fiercely, falling to the ground together in grim combat. Disputes like this often arise over their food, and there is generally a few pugnaciously-disposed ones in each flock, causing disturbances amongst the others more peacefully inclined. The cantankerous ones may usually be detected by the quick quiver of the wings and their angry cries.

Many names have been given to the Silvereye, almost all having reference to the distinctive white rim around the eyes—wax-eye, silvereye, white-eye, and even button-eye. Often, too, it is called the blightbird, and this, though not a pleasing name, is the most appropriate one, for they are great destroyers of blight and do much to clear the gardens of many pests. Rose growers, especially, should always welcome the arrival of this little bird with the silver-rimmed eyes, for it does much to clear the tender shoots of their plants of the obnoxious green-fly; and it is surely a pleasanter method than spraying, to watch these pretty, lithe birds nimbly passing along the branches, gently uttering their plaintive call, and quickly picking off the aphids. Of course, there are always some people to complain about damage in orchards, and Silvereyes are certainly very fond of nice, ripe fruit, but the ones they take are generally, it will be found, those that have already had a hole begun, and so spoilt, by much larger and stronger beaks than their's.

I once witnessed one of the prettiest sights imaginable—a party of Silvereyes congregated in a flowering currant (*Ribes*), feeding on the nectar of its fragrant red blooms. They were swinging in all kinds of pretty attitudes as they partook of their dainty meal, and all the while a constant murmur of music, as they sociably conversed with one another, fell pleasantly on the ear. Soon they flew off in search of "fresh fields," but the picture they made—birds mingling with lovely flowers—will for ever remain in my memory.

Ocean Wanderer.—Whilst on a voyage on the "Chitral," the evening before we reached Fremantle from England, July 13, 1931, there came aboard a Petrel, which I made out was a White-faced Storm-petrel (*Pelagodroma marina dulciæ*), according to W. B. Alexander's "Birds of the Ocean" (which is a splendid book for a voyage). The bird was rather exhausted, but I was able to catch it and handle it for some time.—W. A. CAVE, R.A.O.U., Walkerville, S.A.