

Where 'Robins' Meet

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Since 1934 I have traversed the Calder Highway by car between Mildura and Melbourne on numerous occasions each year. By keeping careful notes of the birds observed en route by day and by night, interesting facts on the distribution of many species have gradually been established.

In suitably-timbered country along this Highway the Southern Yellow Robin (*Eopsaltria australis*) occurs in fair numbers as far north as the 125 mile peg just beyond Inglewood, but from there on to the 139 mile peg to the south of Wedderburn only odd pairs may be seen from time to time. So far as I have been able to ascertain, only three breeding pairs reside in the last fourteen miles of this extreme northern limit of the Yellow Robin's distribution along this Highway.

The Southern Scrub Robin (*Drymodes brunneopygia*) on the other hand had never been seen farther south than Mittyack until January 15, 1944, when, in company with Mr. Hal Thomas, I saw one of these birds cross the road close to the 139 mile peg. We stopped to confirm the record and had an excellent view of the bird, which was in very poor worn plumage. An extensive search failed to reveal any other Scrub Robins that day. Although I made frequent visits to this spot it was not until July 17, 1949, that I heard the soft musical call of the Scrub Robin again, but I was unable to locate the bird in the dense whipstick mallee scrub. On August 18, 1948, several birds were seen, and on January 18, 1952, four were feeding together at the very spot where Mr. Thomas and I had first seen the bird eight years before.

Since then a number of pairs have been located within the immediate vicinity of the 139 mile peg, and nests in use have been found during the months of August and September in the intervening years. In this particular area the Scrub Robin population is denser than in the mallee timber between Hattah and Ouyen which is generally recognized as their stronghold.

It was an unusual and unexpected experience to discover a patch of timber in which Yellow Robins and Scrub Robins were permanently established. That, however, was not the only interesting feature of the survey. I soon found that two other species of robins often nested in the same area, and that during autumn and winter two migratory species arrived. The breeding species were the Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*) and the Hooded Robin (*Melanodryas cucullata*) whilst the migrants were the Scarlet Robin (*Petroica multicolor*) and the Flame Robin (*Petroica phoenicea*).

Although I have never actually seen more than four of these species together at any one time, nevertheless it is quite apparent from my records that in favourable seasons during autumn and winter months the six species undoubtedly meet at this point.

During May, June, and July the Scarlet Robin and the Flame Robin occur in numbers along the Calder Highway but during 1947 and 1948 the movement was considerable and in fact abnormal, both as to the number of individuals and the extent of the migration. On May 26, 1947, many mixed flocks of both species and both sexes were observed all along the Highway as far as Charlton. The following year they were even more numerous and were first recorded at Charlton during a trip to Melbourne on May 16, 1948. On June 2, 1948, the Flame Robins had reached Sea Lake, and on July 1 a male in full mature plumage was flushed from a fence just a little to the north of Nowingi. It may be of interest to note that whilst I was travelling from Mildura to Kerang via Balranald and Moulamein on May 28, 1948, considerable numbers of Flame Robins were met with all along the road from a point midway between Balranald and Moulamein.

The stomach contents of a bird found near Moulamein were examined by Mr. Alex. Burns, Entomologist of the National Museum, Melbourne, who reported as follows—

Contents practically all coleopterous (beetle) remains; the following families were identified—Curculionidea (weevils), Tenebrionidae (ground beetles, bark beetles, etc.) and Elateridae (click beetles). Also remains of cricket, fam. Gryllidae (order Orthoptera), part of cephalothorax of a spider, and parts of a grub or caterpillar but in too advanced a state of digestion to be certain whether coleopterous or lepidopterous.

The only other locality of interest as a meeting place along the Calder Highway is on the northern slopes of Big Hill some eight miles to the west of Bendigo. There during the winter months, in company with Mr. Hugh Milne, I have seen the following species in the same patch of timber—Southern Yellow Robin, Scarlet Robin, Flame Robin, Red-capped Robin, Hooded Robin and the Rose Robin (*Petroica rosea*). At first it was thought by us that the occurrence of the Rose Robin in the area was accidental, but subsequent observations by Mr. Milne over a number of years have established the fact that the Rose Robin is a regular winter visitor to the district.

From a distributional point of view it would be most interesting to know to what extent in Victoria at least the winter habitat of the Rose Robin overlaps that of the Red-capped Robin and the Hooded Robin, and whether there are any other localities in which the Southern Yellow Robin meets the Scrub Robin, birds not closely related but representative of distinct habitats.

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