

## Defence of the Nest by the Little Crow

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The identification of the Little Crow (*Corvus bennetti*) in the field is, to say the least, difficult. So similar is it in plumage to the Raven (*C. coronoides*), and so variable is the latter species in size, that identification using these two points is at all times dangerous and often impossible. The observer is therefore forced to rely, in the main, on the differences in calls, but there are certain differences in some of the habits of the two birds that can assist. One of these differences, and one to which I have seen no reference, is the dissimilarity of the reactions of the Raven and Little Crow to human intruders at the nest.

When disturbed at the nest, the Raven quietly drops low to the ground and flies to a vantage point at least 200 yards away. Here it may sit quite still, unless the intruder remains in the area or approaches closer to the bird, when it will fly right away and not return until some time has elapsed. The Little Crow, however, on leaving the nest invariably flies around in the vicinity calling loudly, thereby attracting its mate and often other birds nesting nearby (this species usually nests in small, loose colonies). At times attacks are made on the intruder, the force of these varying considerably, following which the pair of birds will sit in a nearby tree closely watching proceedings, and perhaps flying over at intervals for a closer look. The reaction of the birds appears to be much stronger when the nest contains young. When there are eggs in the nest the sitting bird can sometimes be induced to resume brooding by retreating but a few yards from the nest-tree and remaining still.

At a nest containing a single, fully-fledged young bird, a boy removing the bird for banding was repeatedly dived upon by both parents, but when they were pelted with sticks by myself from the base of the tree, they flew to a dead tree 50 yards away and made no more attacks, although they returned and hovered overhead when the bird squawked whilst being banded.

At another nest containing two young ready to fly, some ten birds were attracted by the calls of the parents and all flew excitedly from tree to tree in the vicinity, but no attack was made as the nest-tree was climbed. Both young flew from the nest and were guided away by the parents. One was captured and banded, during which process a parent bird flew very close but did not attack.

An endeavour was made to capture three young birds, about two days out of a nest and still weak of flight. The three young blundered their way through belah scrub (*Casuarina cristata*), closely escorted by the parents. One adult bird returned while I was about 75 yards behind and repeatedly swooped at my head. In the first two dives a stream of faeces was directed at me with considerable accu-

racy. The bird returned to the young after some ten dives at me but when I continued the pursuit it once more returned and hovered some 30 feet above me. From this position it half-closed its wings and plummeted down at me, some part of its plumage making a strong drumming noise, much akin to that made by snipe in courtship flight. No contact was made with my body, the bird pulling out of its dive about three feet above me, to return to its hover and a repeat dive. As I was slowed by the attacks the young birds made good their escape and after five "drumming dives" my assailant left me to return to its young.

The above examples indicate the type of behaviour that may be expected from nesting Little Crows and I have never experienced such behaviour from Ravens, excepting an earlier note of mine (*Emu*, 59: 296), which referred to an attack by believed Ravens when I approached them at a sheep's carcass. That event occurred four years ago when I was over-confident in my ability to distinguish between the Little Crow and the Raven. I now believe that my attackers on that occasion were, in fact, Little Crows. In the excitement of the attack, the usually short call of the Little Crow may become a little protracted and I offer this as an excuse for my mis-identification. The birds concerned in this incident were thought to be immature and it is probable they were actually a family party. The date (November) is consistent with that, as is also the fact that the location was in belah scrub, a frequent nesting habitat of the Little Crow but not of the Raven.

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**Juvenile plumage in White-headed Stilt.**—There does not appear to exist any description of the somewhat puzzling juvenile plumage of the White-headed Stilt (*Himantopus leucocephalus*). It differs considerably from the well-known immature stage described in several ornithological works.

A juvenile male secured by me at a lagoon near Cadell, Murray River, S.A., on January 4, 1961, had the general appearance of a large sandpiper with pink legs. The plumage of the mantle and upper wing-coverts was laced with light brownish-buff; hind-neck sparingly speckled with light grey; crown of head grey, laced with dirty-white to pale buff. Axillaries white. Extreme tips of secondaries margined with whitish-grey, showing as light margin to wings in flight.

Iris brownish-orange; pharynx flesh pink; legs and feet pale rose-pink; bill black with extreme base of lower mandible brownish. Dimensions: total length 316 mm; tail 69 mm; span of wings 570 mm; wing 261 mm; tarsus 84 mm; middle toe and claw 48 mm; tip of claws of middle toes exceed tip of tail by 118 mm.—E. F. BOEHM, Sutherlands, S.A., 19/3/62.