

The Charming Crescent Honeyeater.

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THE Crescent Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris pyrrhoptera*) is moderately dispersed throughout large areas of the scrub country of southern Victoria, where its loud, penetrating cry, "Egypt," is a familiar bird-note. In plumage the male presents a neat and sprightly appearance, having a conspicuous black and white breast, bright yellow on wings, and dark brown on back and tail. Although having similar markings, the female is considerably duller in plumage, and has a brown breast indistinctly marked with two black stripes.

I had often seen and heard these birds in many of the forest parts of Victoria, and on a few occasions had found their nests while working my way through dense scrub; but it was not until August 30, 1925, that I gained my first opportunity of observing their nesting habits. On this date I was engaged in photographing Scrub-Wrens in a patch of tea-tree scrub near Lilydale, and unexpectedly came upon a newly-built nest in a thick tea-tree bush about 5 ft. from the ground. The birds were not in evidence that day, but on visiting the nest a week later I found the female sitting upon two delicately-colored eggs. Efforts to photograph the sitting bird proved unsuccessful on account of the secluded position of the nest and the dull light on that day. I again visited the nest ten days later, but found indications of desertion; the eggs were wet and the nest was saturated by the rain which had fallen that day. However, three days later the female was still on the nest and had hatched out two young ones. These were lightly covered with black down and had their eyes closed.

For several days after the young were hatched the female continued sitting on the nest, leaving it only for brief intervals to procure food for herself and young in the surrounding bushes. The male, who had seldom relieved his partner during the incubation, was now compelled to fulfil his duties in earnest, and was, therefore, constantly engaged in bringing food to the young ones. The duration of these visits was from fifteen to twenty minutes. The method of approaching the nest was similar on each occasion, and the bird never departed from the custom. On returning from afield with food he would give two or three short, sharp notes, and then fly down and perch upon a small, bent, dead sapling. Here he would display much uneasiness at my presence by hopping backwards and forwards along the branch. Then, pausing for a few seconds, he would make a dive directly on to the edge of the nest, from where he would again scan my camera in a curious fashion before proceeding to feed the young ones. Upon completing this mission he would dart swiftly past me and show resentment by snapping his bill. Eventually he became so confiding that I was able to discard the use of a line to the release and take the photos while standing by the camera.

With the advent of brighter weather I made many further attempts to photograph both parent birds at the nest. With the usual temerity



MALE CRESCENT HONEYEATER AT NEST.

Photo. by D. Dickison.

of his sex the male disregarded my presence and came regularly to feed the young,* but the female evinced a most retiring disposition. Throughout the whole of the time my camera was near the nest she showed feelings of concern. She would approach and settle on the nest very cautiously, and would leave it on the slightest sound.

The male made many visits to bathe in a small pool of water some fifty yards from the nest. By manoeuvring the wings he was able to splash the water over his back, and this he would repeat several times. Then, for a few minutes, he would preen his feathers on a branch before resuming foraging.

This pair of birds was very partial to some flowering lucerne trees growing in an old orchard some two hundred yards away from their nest. In addition to nectar-bearing flowers, these trees carried multitudes of insects, which probably accounted for the close relationship between the trees and the Honeyeaters. That this was not an isolated instance is supported by my having witnessed the only two or three pairs of these birds in the Loch Valley, at Noojee, being almost entirely confined to a few lucerne trees growing on the river bank. Although numerous other trees were in flower at that time, the Crescent Honeyeaters were never seen feeding in other trees. Investigations into the food of certain Australian birds have revealed the diet of this Honeyeater to be almost entirely insectivorous.

The nest is constructed of bark, usually that of messmate and stringy-bark trees, and is lined with long, thin strips of soft bark or thin stems of dry grass. Generally it is placed amongst sword-grass or in a thick, low bush. The number of eggs to a clutch varies; usually three but very often only two are laid. In many cases these variations are probably due to the season or even the locality in which they are laid. They are similar to the eggs of most Honeyeaters, being a faint pink, marked at the larger end with heavy red and pinkish spots. Incubation usually takes a fortnight, but this time may be exceeded by one or even three days.

Unlike most Honeyeaters, which seem adapted to practically any class of forest country, the Crescent Honeyeater appears to be strictly confined to light scrubby country in which sword-grass grows abundantly, and through this preference it is restricted to small areas.

In distribution the Crescent Honeyeater ranges from southern Queensland along the Great Dividing Range to Victoria, finally ending in South Australia. Tasmania is regarded as its stronghold, from which fact it has earned the casual name of Tasmanian Honeyeater. When many of the original conditions existed around Melbourne years ago, this bird inhabited the scrub within eight miles of the city. But with the changes that have taken place, it has long since been forced to retire into more secluded localities, and at present it would be difficult to find a pair within a radius of 16 miles of Melbourne.

*Is it not the experience of bird-photographers that the female of the species is usually the tamer of the two?—EDITOR.