

Unusual Nesting Site of Fairy Martins

By H. B. BOSS-WALKER, Bendigo.

While motoring with a friend through Huntly (about 7 miles north of Bendigo, Victoria) on December 5, 1931, I noticed a small flock of Martins congregating about a temporary roadside pool. They proved to be Fairy Martins (*Hylochelidon ariel*). Our first thought was that they were drinking, but a moment's observation showed that it was not the water, but the soft mud around the edges of the pool, that was the attraction. Each bird would settle, cram its beak so full of mud that it could apparently hold no more, and then fly off in a certain direction across an orchard.

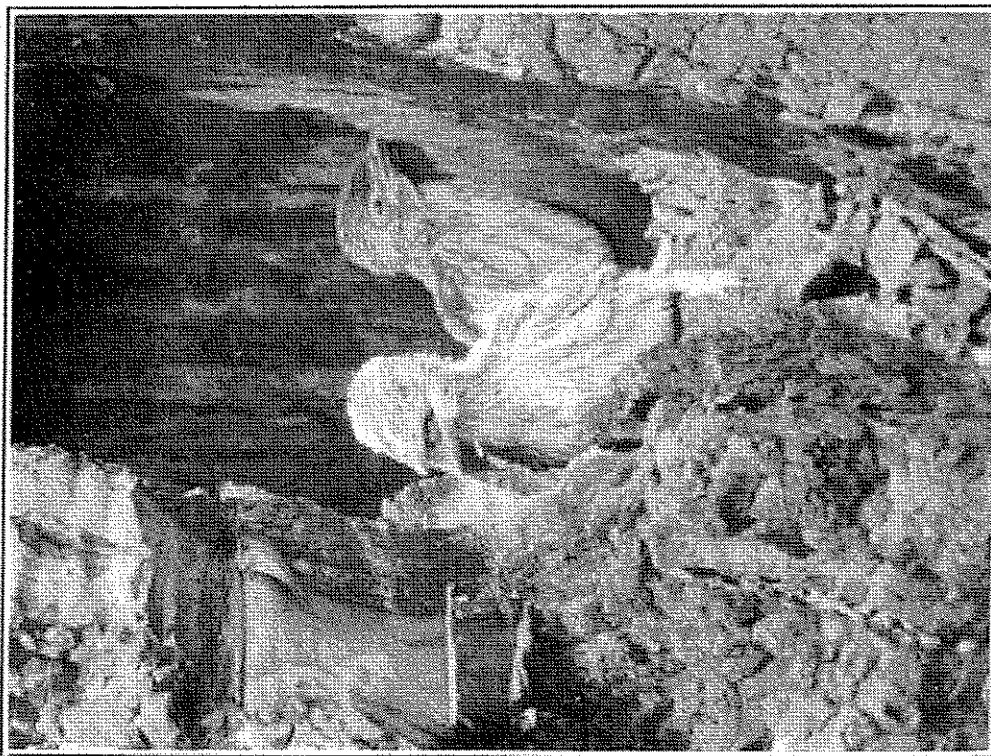
Time permitting, our next step was obvious. Noting the direction of flight, we turned down a convenient side-road and, before we had gone a hundred yards, found ourselves, not without surprise, at our destination. Lying on its side, at the edge of the road, was an iron cylinder which had apparently once been part of a boiler. It was about 4 feet in diameter and 7 feet in length, being open at both ends. Entering at one end and leaving by the other were the Martins. On closer investigation, we found a little colony of 10 mud nests, situated under the "roof" and in various stages of construction. Some were separate, while others were being built on the semi-detached principle. All were roofed by the iron, and we felt that the occupants would regret their departure from orthodoxy in choosing their nesting site, when the hot days of January came.

During our inspection, the birds, arriving with fresh material, flew around or settled on the fence nearby, and as soon as we withdrew a few yards and sat down, they continued their building operations. A bird would alight on the threshold of a nest, disappear within, and, having turned round, reappear at the opening. The pellet of mud which it had brought would then be applied at the desired spot of the rim. The method of application was interesting. The beakful was deposited, not in one act, but gradually, a little at a time, while the beak (and head) of the bird kept up a constant rapid vibration, kneading the clay and working it into position. Each beakful, however, would be confined to one part of the rim, and be visible afterwards as one of the knobs with which the outside of the nest is studded.

Perhaps because there were not enough of them, the Martins did not keep up a continual stream of arrivals and departures. For a couple of minutes there would not be a sign of a bird; then one or two would appear, and a few seconds later there would be quite a busy scene. Work was



Fairy Martins' Nests.
Photo. by H. Boss-Walker.



Nestling Kookaburras.
Photo. by A. E. Bridgewater, R.A.O.U.

going on at quite half the nests while we were watching. Sometimes two birds entered the same nest almost simultaneously. It has been stated that Fairy Martins normally only work in the early morning and evening. On this occasion, however, they were busy at noon on a warm sunny day.

The tameness of the birds suggested that it might be possible to photograph them at work; so we returned two days later (December 7) with the necessary apparatus. Arriving at about 11 a.m. on a very warm day, we found that the work had advanced considerably. Some nests appeared to be practically finished externally, while others still lacked the "spout." No mud was being added, but some of the birds were picking up short lengths of straw from the roadway, and taking them into the nests, presumably for lining purposes. After the camera was set up, however, they declined to enter the cylinder during the hour and a half that we had at our disposal, and I had to be content with the accompanying snapshot of the nests without the birds. It was necessary to hold the camera abnormally low—about 18 inches from the ground—to show the nests adequately; hence the exaggerated size of the cylinder.

The Nesting of the Kookaburra.—Usually the Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo gigas*) chooses a deep hole for nesting purposes, more often than not the entrance being gained through a "spout." Hence the nestlings are not suitable photographic subjects. Some years ago, however, a pair of "Jackasses" was located, nesting in an open hole in a burnt stump, about nine feet high, but as there was only a roll-film camera available the accompanying photograph is far from being perfect.

On October 22 the hole was occupied by two newly-hatched young—squirring, naked, bulging-eyed and generally repulsive-looking—and one egg. No nesting material was used other than the rotten wood and the filth of the birds. Four days later the three nestlings, still blind and quite naked, were clamouring for food. On November 2, as the hole was approached, the adult birds left, and I was fortunate enough to see the larger of the two nestlings (one had disappeared) attempting to devour a fledgeling, probably a Blue Wren. This great swallowing feat was managed after many violent gulpings, the young Jackass being very satisfied with the performance, gurgling and laughing in a manner that reflected credit on his upbringing. The nesting hole by this time was very filthy, the stench being almost unbearable.

A rare and curious name for the Kookaburra is Johnnie-bottom.—A. E. BRIDGEWATER, R.A.O.U., Mansfield, Vic.