

Various Bird Problems

By A. H. CHISHOLM, Melbourne, Victoria

What of the Paradise Parrot?—It is regrettable to have to record that the Paradise Parrot (*Psephotus pulcherri-mus*)—known of old also as the Beautiful Parrot, Scarlet-shouldered Parrot, Ant-hill Parrot, and Soldier Parrot—is again “missing.” As stated in *The Emu* for July of 1922 (“The ‘Lost’ Paradise Parrot”) nothing had been seen of this graceful and beautiful bird for many years until Mr. C. H. H. Jerrard noted a small company near Gayndah (Queensland) in December of 1921, and in the next month photographed a pair that was attempting to breed in a termites’ mound. As recorded further in *The Emu* (“Seeking Rare Parrots,” July, 1924), Mr. Jerrard and I found a pair in the same district in November of 1922, and during the ensuing year he gained odd glimpses of the birds. Since then the only records of the species have been two notes in 1927 by Miss Florence Irby from the north of New South Wales (*Emu*, xxvi, p. 236 and xxvii, p. 15). Mr. Jerrard has now written me (under date of January 18, 1936): “‘Brinebool’ has vanished—shall we sadly say for ever? At least, I have no record or report of him for the past eight years (last record, 14/11/27).”

The Swiftlets’ Cave.—Now that Dunk Island (North Queensland), the pretty spot made famous by the late “Beachcomber” Banfield, has become a tourist resort, it is to be hoped that the Swiftlets’ cave on the island remains undiscovered by the visitors, or at least undisturbed. One can imagine what Banfield would have said could he have foreseen any of his beloved birds being subject to the whims of tourists. However, the cave of the Swiftlets (*Collocalia francica*) is well hidden, and as only one or two men now living have seen it, possibly it will remain inviolate. As recounted in *The Emu* (1909, p. 146) Banfield found the cave in 1908, about ten years after he took up residence on the island. It then contained fifty-three nests. Curiously, when A. J. Campbell visited the cave in 1915, (see *Emu*, xv, p. 253), there were still only “between 50 and 60” nests. The number increased notably within the next few years, for when I visited the cave in November of 1921 (see *Birds and Green Places*, pp. 67-70), there were approximately 220 nests. About 100 of the tiny cups each contained an egg, some 50 each held a young one, and the other 50 or so were empty. It was a memorable experience to fraternize with those moth-like birds in their tropic recess, and to think back upon it is to hope that they are still flourishing. Incidentally, the Dunk Island cave appears to be the only known breeding-place of the species in Australia. There need be

little doubt, however, as Kendall Broadbent suggested, that some colonies breed on the mainland—"in rocky gorges of the coast range, from the Herbert River to above Cairns, but not as far north as Cape York."

Vocal Mimicry Among Birds.—I would be glad to hear from members of the R.A.O.U. who can supply notes on this subject—which birds they have definitely identified as mimics, whether male or female, at what season, in what circumstances, etc. Is the Shy Heath-Wren (*Hylacola cauta*) a mocker? Its close relative, *H. pyrrhopygia*, has long been known to Sydney ornithologists as a splendid mimic, but no one seems to have remarked the ability with *H. cauta*; nor was I able to do so when listening to birds in the Mallee of north-western Victoria in the spring of 1935. Does relative lack of scope make a difference in such a matter?

Because mimicry obtains largely among ground-birds, I had supposed, as stated in my paper on "Vocal Mimicry Among Australian Birds" in *The Ibis* (1932, pp. 605-624) that members of the genus *Amytornis* and *Calamanthus* would prove to be competent mockers. My experience among those birds has not been extensive, but I have to confess failure so far to detect mimicry in the notes of those heard; nor can I find any records on the point. It will be strange if *Hylacola cauta* and the genera *Amytornis* and *Calamanthus* prove to lack mimetic ability (or desire) in view of the fact that in habits, song, and size they bear a general resemblance to skilled mockers *Hylacola pyrrhopygia* and *Pyrrholaemus brunneus*.

It would appear that mimicry is practised by some of the Thornbills, but is not constant throughout the genus. K. A. Hindwood and L. G. Chandler have directed attention to the mimetic ability of the Brown Thornbill (see *Emu*, 1933, p. 298), and there are one or two records of other Thornbills as mockers. Thus in *The Emu* for April of 1910 (p. 199) F. L. Whitlock states that the most usual notes he heard from a specimen of *Acanthiza robustirostris* in Western Australia were "an imitation of the call of the Narrow-billed Bronze-Cuckoo," and he goes so far as to suggest that the mimicry attracts the female Cuckoo to the vicinity of the Thornbill's nest. Again, in *The Emu* (1913, p. 41), L. G. Chandler records having heard the Red-tailed Thornbill (*A. hamiltoni*) "imitating the calls of the Fantailed and Bronze-Cuckoos in a low tone." It is curious, in view of such isolated records, that when in the Victorian Mallee in September of 1935 I was deceived three times by Red-tailed Thornbills—their calls led me to look for Narrow-billed Bronze-Cuckoos. Why should these little birds be so partial to the calls of Cuckoos?

The Painted Honeyeater.—A pair of Painted Honeyeaters

(*Grantiella picta*) appeared near the residence of Mr. W. C. Tonge, of Eltham, Victoria (about 15 miles north-east of Melbourne) in October, 1935. They stayed until December 16, and then disappeared as suddenly as they came. Mr. Tonge did not succeed in finding a nest, but he saw a "Painted" feeding what appeared to be a young bird. As recorded by K. A. Hindwood in *The Emu* in January of last year (p. 151), Painted Honeyeaters bred at Eltham in December of 1923 and were seen there again in the summer of 1929-30. It is odd that breaks of five and six years have occurred between visits, and odd, too, that Eltham alone (?) should be the favoured spot near Melbourne. The probability is, however, that the visits are regulated by the supply of mistletoe berries, which are the staple food of the birds. Indeed Painted "Honeyeaters" have little or no claim to be regarded as honey-eaters; they are as confirmed eaters of mistletoe berries as is the Mistletoe-bird itself, although *Dicaeum* is common and *Grantiella* is rare.

Having met the Painted Honeyeater near Sydney in January-February of 1932, I was interested, during a visit to Eltham in November last, in comparing the notes of the respective birds. They were "the same, only different"—the Eltham birds called "Geor-gie, Geor-gie," in the manner of the Sydney birds, but the notes were less round and full and contained a curious burr that was not present in the voices of the Sydney birds. When Mr. Hindwood wrote his informative summary of knowledge of the Painted Honeyeater (*Emu*, vol. xxiv, pp. 149-157), he was unable to discuss the voices of a pair seen near St. Mary's (Sydney) because they were quiet when we first met them. However, Messrs. J. Ramsay, N. Chaffer, and I visited the spot a few days later and heard the "Georgie" call—a strange, deliberate, almost human note—several times.

We observed then that four actions engrossed the birds: (1) eating mistletoe berries, of which they consumed a remarkable quantity; (2) evacuating, which they did with great frequency; (3) preening the feathers, which apparently were affected by the sticky berries; and (4) resting quietly, which appeared to be necessary after such persistent feasting. Each of the birds had an engaging habit of stretching the wings outwards and upwards when preening, apparently to free the feathers of the sticky substance. It was a trying business gazing into a steely sky on that February day, and the expedition ended with tired eyes and staggering headaches. Let us be thankful that few other birds nest in the heat of February.

Bristle-birds and Scrub-birds.—Recent notes on Bristle-birds, and in particular a reference to the voice of *Dasyornis longirostris*, have reminded me of experiences with the Rufous Bristle-bird (*D. broadbenti*), in the Otway Ranges

(Vic.), in March of 1934. For one who had searched unavailingly for the Eastern Bristle-bird (near Sydney), it was refreshing to be able to locate the Rufous species, without much effort, soon after reaching Lorne. Sitting down to listen in a gully rank with sword-grass and blackberries, I heard, within a few minutes, a rich "chip, chip, chip, chewee," followed by a softer "chew-a," perhaps forty yards away. The notes were clear and penetrating, with something of the imperious quality of the Rufous Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis*), as heard in a Queensland jungle, and suggesting also the "chewy-chewy," without the crack, of the Whip-bird. After that I heard the Bristle-bird every day for a week, but rarely saw it. Once, however, a pair called within ten yards, and I saw one of them engaged in uttering a beautiful call from the ground. Then both perched on fallen sticks 4 feet up in a tangle and the melodious call was given several times. Presently one emitted a loud "Queeek," rather like the alarm call of *Menura* or *Orthonyx*, and both disappeared. On different days the calls varied slightly. Always they were preceded by the rich "chip, chip, chip," which sometimes would be uttered as many as ten times as a prelude to the rich call, and sometimes were uttered without any following note. The various calls were: "Chip, chip, chip, chip-choowee"; "chit, chit, chit, chit, choowee-oo"; and "chit, chit, chit, chit, chewee-wit."

From the fact that F. L. Whitlock (*Emu*, xxxv, p. 201), heard the Western Bristle-bird call "chip-pee-tee-pee-tee-pet," it would appear that the notes of the two species bear a general resemblance. In some respects the calls of my bird (or birds) suggested the Whip-bird, in others the Golden Whistler, and in others *Atrichornis*; but the "chips" or "chits" were more staccato, higher-toned than, and not so swelling as those of the Rufous Scrub-bird. On two occasions I heard a Bristle-bird *singing*—the unmistakable voice rendering a charming, chuckling whisper-song in the depths of the blackberries. Perhaps, as J. A. Ross has suggested (*Emu*, xi, p. 122) there is some affinity between the voice of the Rufous Bristle-bird and that of the Pilot-bird. At any rate, both voices are highly melodious, and it seems to me foolish to refer to the Bristle-bird as the "Cart-wheel-bird," merely because the "chits" are high-pitched and penetrating.

I am not aware whether any osteological work has been done on Bristle-birds, but the field characters of the Rufous species suggests that the genus is out of place in its present position in the *Checklist*. Bristle-birds seem, indeed, to have much in affinity with Scrub-birds. The odd fact, however, is that *Dasyornis* has strong bristles projecting from the gape, whereas *Atrichornis* (*atrichos*, without hair, *ornis*, a bird), is distinguished by a total absence of vibrissæ. This anomaly was remarked by the shrewd John Gould,

who placed *Sphenura* (= *Dasyornis*) and *Atrichornis* side by side. I had overlooked Gould's statements earlier, and have only at this moment noted them in his *Handbook*. My suggestion regarding the affinity of the two genera, therefore, is not new. Nevertheless, it is interesting to find that the impressions of one who has had field experience of both *Atrichornis* and *Dasyornis*—a rare privilege—tend to bear out what Gould deduced from cabinet observation.

It is curious that, of the three species of Bristle-birds, the one last discovered is easily the best known. That species (*D. broadbenti*) is still fairly common along the coast of south-western Victoria, and a good deal has been written about it. On the other hand, very little indeed has been given, either in books or *The Emu*, in relation to the Eastern and Western Bristle-birds. Not one field article on *D. brachypterus* is available; the only notes in *The Emu* are a statement that the R.A.O.U. party recorded the species as "rare" at Mallacoota Inlet in 1914 (although present I personally did not see or hear it on that occasion), and that it was seen near Sydney up to about fifteen years ago. We do not even know the distribution of the species, past or present.* A. J. North restricts it to coastal New South Wales. A. J. Campbell adds Queensland (on what authority?) and Victoria, and questions South Australia. The species is undoubtedly very rare, but possibly it will be re-discovered in some quiet spot on the coast of eastern Victoria or New South Wales.

Whistlers in the Mallee.—A few days' experience in the Mallee of north-western Victoria in the spring of 1935 has led me to support those who believe that the Red-lored Whistler (*Pachycephala rufogularis*) is a distinct species, and is not, as several writers have held, a phase of the Gilbert Whistler (*P. ornata*). The comprehensive paper on the subject by J. N. McGilp and F. E. Parsons (*Emu*, October, 1935, pp. 113-126), had not been published at the time, and I went to the Panitya country a trifle prejudiced against the belief that *P. rufogularis* was a good species. What I did not know—and the astonishing thing is that this was not emphasized sooner—was that the female Red-lored Whistler had the dull red extending from the lores to the throat, breast, and abdomen (in contrast to the uniform greyness of the female Gilbert Whistler), to say nothing of the fact that the male Red-lored Whistler had much more colour than the male Gilbert Whistler.

These points soon became apparent when Mr. F. E. Howe

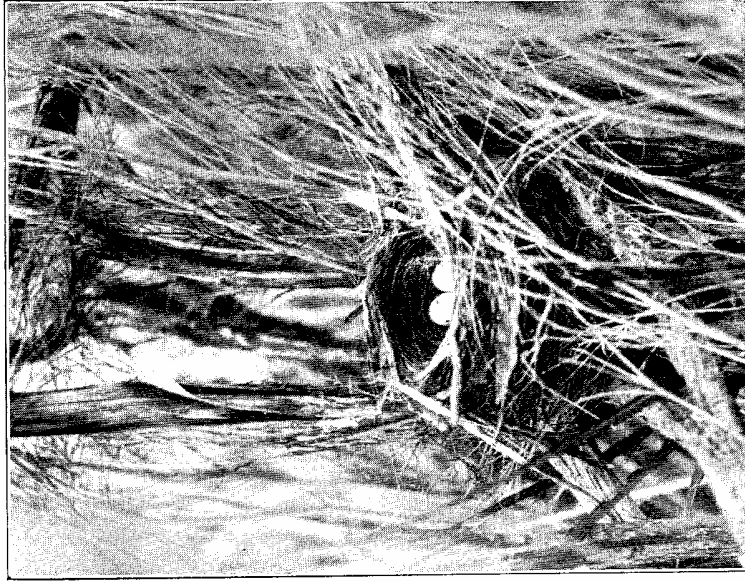
*There are two clutches of eggs of Eastern Bristle-birds in the H. L. White Collection in the National Museum, Melbourne. One was taken 55 miles south-west of Grafton, New South Wales, on October 24, 1898, and the other in the same locality on February 4, 1900. The first set was taken by Ralph Hargrave near Sydney in 1880. Those three clutches appear to be the only ones known.

directed me, in wild country, to a brooding bird on a nest low in a broken broom-bush. "A Crested Bell-bird," Howe said, after a hasty glance. "A Gilbert Whistler," said I, after an equally hasty glance. But when the bird flushed I saw at once that it was not the Gilbert Whistler as I used to know that species twenty years ago in central Victoria (see *Emu*, xvi, p. 40); it was brighter-coloured than even the brightest of male "Gilberts." Presently, in response to a squeak, another bird dashed up, and it became apparent that the first bird was a female, since the newcomer was brighter still. Both birds exercised charming voices; their notes were richer and fuller than the "Gilbert" calls that echoed in memory across the years. We saw several of these Whistlers later, and I found a nest with eggs neatly woven into the top of a porcupine bush. In this instance (the eggs being fresh) the birds were very shy, whereas in the first instance (incubation being advanced) I had little difficulty in photographing both birds at the nest. Unfortunately an accident ruined the plates.

Meanwhile, in a particular area—Hockey's abandoned farm—we saw several birds which I took to be Gilbert Whistlers; the females all seemed to be plain grey and the males apparently had the dull red only on the throat. Discussing this point with Mr. Roy Ribbons, a district farmer with experience of birds, he affirmed that all the red-throated Whistlers in this paddock were "Gilberts." Mr. Howe, on the other hand, said he had a good look at some and saw red lores. If that be so the problem becomes complicated. I am inclined to think, however, that Ribbons was correct, and that the securing of a pair of birds at Hockey's would have proved them to be Gilbert Whistlers.

As Messrs. McGilp and Parsons have pointed out, it is strange that Gould confused the females of the two species, and that various later writers either did the same thing or assumed *P. rufogularis* to be the immature form of *P. ornata*. A. J. Campbell went further: he found "precisely similar birds" near Melbourne, and therefore declared *P. rufogularis* to be the immature form of the Golden Whistler (*P. pectoralis*). Indeed Whistlers appear to have been Campbell's stumbling-block, for he described a supposedly new *Eopsaltria* in 1910, and learned later, through Mathews, that it was the female of *Pachycephala melanura* (*Emu*, xi, p. 246). The Black-tailed Whistler, by the way, appears to be the yellow-breasted counterpart of the Red-lored Whistler: the female in each species is warmly coloured.

It may be added that we saw two other kinds of Whistlers in the north-western Mallee, which is probably the only part of Victoria that contains four of the five species of *Pachycephala* found in that State. Oddly, the few Rufous-breasted Whistlers seen there were scarcely worthy of the name (so much has the breast colour faded in that dry area), whereas



Nest and eggs of the Red-lored Whistler in a fallen broom bush, north-western Victoria.



Nest of Red-lored Whistler in porcupine bush, north-western Victoria.

Photos. by A. H. Chisholm.



Welcome Swallow at nest.

Photo. by A. J. Elliott.

the Golden-breasted Whistlers of the locality were gorgeous. Again and again I was struck by the beauty, particularly on the mantle, of these yellow-breasted birds. In a considerable experience of Golden Whistlers from Queensland through New South Wales and Victoria to Tasmania I have never seen birds of the kind as highly-coloured as those of the north-western Mallee. Their notes, however, did not differ appreciably from those of Golden Whistlers elsewhere. Presumably this is the bird which A. J. North described as the Mallee Whistler (*P. meridionalis*).

The Welcome Swallow.—In October, 1934, I decided to try to photograph a pair of Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*) which had a nest in the hollow base of a large woolly-butt tree growing a few hundred yards from my home. In my district, where large, isolated trees are a feature of the landscape, many pairs of Swallows nest annually in those trees which have hollowed-out bases—these often having been originally caused by fire. Few of the nesting sites, however, lend themselves to photography for the Swallows almost invariably build so high in the hollows that the nests are invisible from the outside, except when viewed from close quarters. Consequently, before photography can be attempted a portion of a tree must be cut away and very often that is not easy to do. The majority of the sites do not permit of photography in any case because of their position in relation to the sun and other causes. I make a practice of nailing a sheet of old iron over the cut-away portion of any trees at which I attempt photography in order that the birds may continue to build there.

To return to the nest in question, however, after cutting away enough of the tree to allow the sun to shine directly on to the nest for about one hour each day before it descended behind the range to the west, I waited a few days for the birds to accustom themselves to the altered conditions before placing a "dummy" camera near the nest. Eventually they quietened down fairly well. On the evening of October 12, by which date the young were well grown, I set off with the camera to try conclusions with the Swallows. The birds visited the nest a few times while the light was suitable, but only two exposures were made. Generally the Swallows assumed undesirable positions, although sometimes they departed too hurriedly, after feeding the young, for me to make an exposure.

One old nest of Swallows that I saw built in a hollow tree had been utilized by a pair of Flame Robins (*Petroica phoenicea*) as a nesting site and I have heard of another old nest built in a hayshed being put to the same use by that Robin.—A. J. ELLIOTT, Cambewarra, N.S.W., 15/2/36.