

## Stray Feathers

**A Note on the Gilbert Whistler.**—The Gilbert Whistler is well distributed throughout the mallee scrub areas in north-west Victoria. Murray pine and belar forests are favourite haunts, although the species is just as plentiful in the larger mallee, particularly where the "wait-a-while"—a prickly acacia—grows. The reason is partly that Babblers nest freely in the "wait-a-while," and, the nest of this Whistler is often found on top of an old nest of a Babbler. The nest in the illustration is on top of a Babbler's nest. After I had examined several Babblers' nests in the vicinity, I was approaching a bush in which was another such nest, when I heard a Gilbert Whistler call softly, and from a distance of fifteen yards or more, I could see it sitting on the nest. On a few other occasions I have heard different species of birds call from their nest, and it is possible that, like the barn-yard fowl which has just laid an egg, they broadcast the fact. Though well distributed, one could not call the Gilbert Whistler a very common bird.—L. G. CHANDLER, Red Cliffs, Vic., 12/11/40.

**Nests of Magpie-Larks.**—I was interested to read of the nesting site of the Magpie-Lark recorded by N. H. E. McDonald in the August issue of *The Emu*. Last summer (January) I found and photographed two nests of the same species built on cross arms of telegraph posts.

They were on poles along the main Maitland to Cessnock highway, and, although trees were not plentiful owing to the fact that it is open grass paddock country, they were not so scarce as to force the birds to choose such sites.

The nests were about a mile apart, and in each instance within a few hundred yards of water. That may have had some bearing on the location chosen for nesting, as the weather was extremely hot, the temperature on several occasions being over 110° in the shade. Did the birds choose the particular sites because of a possible advantage in being nearer to water, or has instinct made them choose a site safer from the prowling school-boy? In spite of extreme weather conditions—heat, wind and dust—both broods were safely brought up.

I have since discovered about six more nests, built on telegraph poles on the permanent way of the South Maitland railway line to Cessnock.—A. F. D'OMBRAIN, West Maitland, N.S.W., 19/8/40.

**Vicissitudes of a Dove's Egg.**—Two weeks ago I found the nest and two eggs of a Peaceful Dove (*Geopelia placida*) in a willow tree over the Paterson River. I photographed it



Gilbert Whistler at nest.

Photo. by L. G. Chandler.

but the picture was not good, so I returned (a distance of 18 miles) early next day in order to try again. As I approached the nest the bird flew off, but in such a clumsy manner that it knocked an egg into the stream.

Knowing how "fussy" these birds are, I thought that the nest would be deserted. But the egg was still floating in a little eddy of willow leaves and sticks. I therefore got a 15-foot limb of a tree and raked the egg in near to the bank. Then I walked into the river—clothes and all—the water being up to my waist. I obtained the egg, and, with some difficulty, attained dry land again. Then I discovered that I could not reach the nest, so I cut a long willow stick with a fork at the end and on this fork I threaded a large leaf. I then placed the egg—with blessings—on the leaf. The whole thing shook dangerously but I at last succeeded in replacing the egg on the frail platform that constituted the nest. Then I hastily retreated, but before leaving the locality I returned to the nest and was glad to see that the bird was sitting.

To-day I went out to the nest again and, to my surprise, the two eggs had hatched. Evidently the fall—of about 10 feet—into the river, and a few minutes' immersion, had not been detrimental. — A. F. D'OMBRAIN, West Maitland, N.S.W., 21/10/40.

**Notes on the Apostle-bird.**—In the days before I could lay claim to some degree of intimacy with the species, I had always considered the Apostle-bird (*Struthidea cinerea*) a most unlovely creature—dull of plumage, harsh of voice, and infested with lice. But four years of observation, much of it carried out within a yard of the confident bird, has led to a change of opinion. Viewed at such close quarters, unexpected harmonies of grey and brown are revealed, and one grows accustomed to the raucous clatter going on a foot or so away. Perhaps the Apostle-birds' wife—or wives?—thinks his voice the acme of musical perfection. That I cannot share the opinion would matter little.

My first attempts to study the birds and their behaviour at the nest failed. Whenever I climbed to a nest before eggs had been laid, or when there were only one or two eggs in the nest, the birds promptly deserted it. After several of these occurrences I decided to refrain from climbing to a nest until I could be certain that the clutch was complete and that brooding had commenced. Actually that was a disappointment, as one point I wanted to clear up was whether or not more than one bird laid in the one nest. There is but one observation I can offer in that respect: a nest I climbed to on October 25, 1939, contained three eggs, on which the bird was brooding. I returned to the nest on

the next day, when it contained five eggs. Thus two eggs were laid in less than twenty-four hours, which, presumably, was not the work of one female.

Another problem I have not been able to solve is the complete disappearance of numbers of young birds. Usually rather less than half the young hatched are reared. The table sets out the position:—

Eggs to Nest	No. of Nests	Total Eggs	Young reared
4	2	8	5
5	5	25	14
6	8	48	21
7	4	28	12
8	2	16	9
Totals . . .	21	125	61

The foregoing is an epitome of the results of observations since the beginning of 1937. It is definitely unfortunate that I did not keep a list of the numbers of eggs hatched, as distinct from eggs laid, in each case, as I did with the number of young reared to the stage where they were fit to leave the nest. I believe that the greater loss is of young birds and not of eggs, however. The records actually kept on this point show that of 48 eggs hatched from the following clutches (one of 4, two of 5, two of 6, three of 7, and one of 8—in all 55 eggs) only 21 fledglings reached the nest-leaving stage. What happened to the others?

Disappearances commence when the birds are three or four days old, and there is never any trace of them. No dead young are to be found under, or near, the nest tree, or in the nest. Perhaps they are taken by birds of prey, but, if so, why are they not all taken? Even fully-fledged young would not be able to defend themselves against marauders, and it does not seem feasible that the parents would protect the last of the young birds, in cases where, a day or two previously, they allowed some to be taken. The reduction is too consistent to be effected by chance circumstances.

There is another question here, too. The young do not all disappear on the same day. Sometimes a day elapses between losses, and I have two records in which one bird vanished on each of three consecutive days. On other occasions, two have gone on the one day, though not at the same time. These observations were carried out over an area of about twenty square miles or more. Nesting heights ranged from seven feet to about thirty-five feet, and the season from August 15, which is the earliest I have seen the

birds brooding, until December 12, which is the latest I have known eggs to hatch. The favourite nesting trees here are the white pine (*Callitris robusta*), buloke (*Casuarina Luehmanni*) and apple (*Eucalyptus Sturtiana*). The young remain from 18-20 days.

There can be no doubt that more than one pair of birds assist with the building of the nest, and the rearing of the young, and that more than one female lays in the one nest. Often two, or even three, birds come to the nest at the one time with food, and during plagues of the "grasshopper" (*Chortoicetes*) Apostle-birds play a very useful part. It is not unusual to see a bird arrive with three of the insects in her bill, and drop the three into the nearest gaping mouth. Sometimes part of the meal falls to the ground, and then usually one of the other adults in attendance at the nest flies down to retrieve it. The adult does not leave the nest immediately on feeding the young, but waits for one of them to drop excreta. This the adult seizes, often before it has been completely ejected by the fledgling, and flies away, dropping the excreta some distance off. This possibly is the explanation of the fact that there is rarely trace of faeces in the nest, or even on the ground below.

That the Apostle-bird does not lead a blameless life is shown by the following episode: On November 23, 1938, I was at a nest of the species when one of them attacked a White-browed Wood-Swallow (*Artamus superciliosus*), which had a nest in the next tree. Having driven the Wood-Swallow away, the Apostle-bird flew to the unfortunate bird's nest and quite deliberately pecked each of the three eggs it contained. When I examined the eggs I found they each had a large hole in them. Later the Wood-Swallows deserted the nest.

Another incident had a more humorous side. I had taken a young Gould League member with me to see one nest, and he, appalled at the task of the mother bird in feeding five clamorous nestlings, conceived the bright plan of helping her. To that end he dug some cockchafer grubs and brought them with him the next afternoon. When we climbed to the nest one of the adults was sitting, but other than scolding us roundly as we came to the nest, she took no notice of us. Later she stood on the side of the nest, and my friend gave her one of the grubs, thinking she would relay it to one of the nestlings. Instead she flew away to the nearest tree, where she devoured the offering herself. We repeated the experiment several times, but the young did not get any of the offerings. Perhaps they were not suitable food, but the adults had no qualms about eating them, much to the disgust of my companion.

If there is a more friendly bird in the bush I have yet to meet with it. Often I have had them come up to me when I have been eating my lunch in the bush. They came and sat above me in the trees, to scold and scoff in their own inimitable fashion. Whatever they came for, they remained to "scoff," and appeared quite willing to take all my lunch had I thrown it to them.—P. A. BOURKE, Biddon, N.S.W., 4/5/40.

**Call Notes of the Whipbird.**—Some years ago there was considerable discussion on the call notes uttered by the Eastern Whipbird (*Psophodes olivaceus*). I believe it is now generally agreed that it is usual for the male bird to give the loud call like the cracking of a whip, that extraordinary sound being normally preceded by two or more softer notes scarcely audible at a distance of twenty or thirty yards. The female, if she happens to answer, does so immediately—with two or more short, sharp, loud notes. I have heard as many as five notes given on occasions. The male bird has been known to utter the complete series of notes (Chandler, L. G., *The Emu*, vol. IX, p. 248). I am now able to record a variation, or departure from the normal sequence, that is of the female answering the male.

On the morning of October 9, 1940, I was observing birds on a forest-clad hillside at Roseville, upper Middle Harbour, Sydney. What I thought were two Whipbirds were calling nearby. Presently three birds came into view as they moved about the undergrowth: two were males, the other a female. One of the males had lost its tail, a most ludicrous sight, though otherwise it was in adult plumage. The bird without the tail kept close to the female, never being more than a few feet from her, the other male followed about ten feet away. During the period that I had the three birds in full view the male with the tail gave the "whip" call nine times and on each occasion was answered by the male without the tail, which invariably gave three short loud notes—the same kind of call, in tone and volume, as is usually given by the female, the last note being higher in tone than the other notes. In the present instance, however, the female was silent. I assumed that the birds were courting as it was the beginning of the breeding season. A. J. Campbell (*Nests and Eggs*, p. 268) states that male Whipbirds are most jealous and he quotes an incident wherein two birds fought to the death. The birds I was watching did not show any inclination to fight.—K. A. HINDWOOD, Willoughby, N.S.W., 12/10/40.

**Dotterel Nesting on the Road.**—Some years ago (*Emu*, vol. XXXI, p. 260) there was a report of a Black-fronted Dotterel which nested in a railway yard. Another bird of



the same species is providing a somewhat similar case here at present. It has nested on the busy Oxley Highway (which connects Port Macquarie and Trangie) about five feet in from the side of the road, and is brooding two eggs. Each time a car or truck comes along—every few minutes—the bird leaves the nest and flutters frantically about in the path of the oncoming vehicle. Some thoughtful person has placed a large limb near the nest, which may serve to divert traffic that otherwise would certainly run over and break the eggs. A number of the folk who regularly use the road know of the nest and watch it hopefully, so there will be more than a few disappointed people if the bird's efforts come to nothing.\*—P. A. BOURKE, Gilgandra, N.S.W., 30/10/40.

\*Under date 20/11/40 Mr. Bourke advises that the eggs have been safely hatched.—Ed.

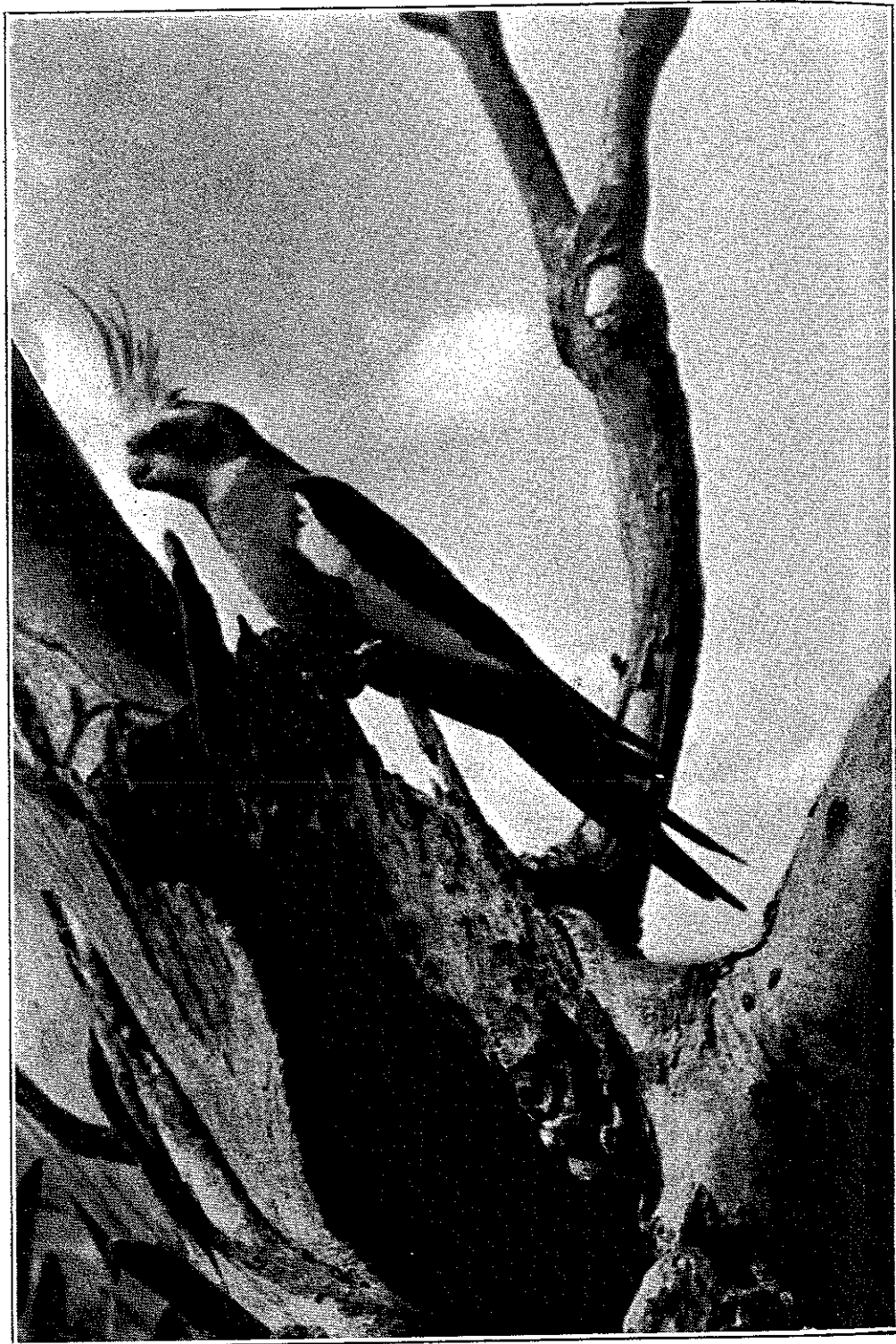
**Further Notes on Mimicry.**—In view of recent discussions I decided to record two further cases of birds indulging in mimicry while excited.

On December 24, 1930, I was looking for a pair of young Great Bower-birds (*Chlamydera nuchalis*). The birds had just left a nest in a clump of mistletoe, when an adult flew out of a patch of lantana and started scolding me. I found the young about twenty yards farther up the creek. When I went near them the old bird flew to the ground and ran behind some bushes and started mimicking other birds. It called like a pair of Laughing Kookaburras that are fighting and like a Blue-faced Honeyeater that has found a snake, while all the time it kept running from side to side of the bushes and looking at me.

Some years ago, while I was cutting cane, a Magpie-Lark picked up something too big to swallow. A Drongo dived at it and chased it into the air. The Drongo uttered its own loud call but the Magpie-Lark still held on to its "prey." The Drongo then uttered the loud sharp call of a Pied Butcher-bird—the call which that bird gives when it has seen or is flying at an enemy. The Magpie-Lark dropped the food and hurried off.

Although we have some very good mimics amongst the local Butcher-birds I have never noticed that species excited when mimicking.

We have one Black-backed Magpie that appears to be a mimic also. These birds always follow the plough when it is working. We use horses, and while we were having a rest it would do likewise. Sitting within a few yards of me it would warble away so low that I could just hear it, and amongst the jumble of notes I could pick out the call of the Forest Kingfisher.—H. THOROGOOD, Kelsey Creek, Proserpine, Qld., 4/11/40.



Male Cockatiel at nesting hollow.

Photo. by C. E. Bryant.



**Kookaburras' Nest Sites.**—An interesting departure from usual nesting custom comes from the Bathurst district. Until about ten years ago the flats along the Macquarie produced fine lucerne crops, and the eastern banks were lined with stacks of lucerne hay. Kookaburras tunnelled into the stacks—always at the end—and many were the Bathurst gardens that had a pet Jackass which had been hatched in a two-foot long burrow in the warm hay. Now the lucerne has gone and in its place are miles of asparagus. The birds have resorted to more natural homes in the hollows of willow trees, hollows that provide homes for "possums" and not a few foxes.—P. A. BOURKE, Gilgandra, N.S.W., 30/10/40.

**A Note on the Cockatiel.**—At Karrawinna North, thirty miles west of Mildura, Victoria, on the road to Renmark, S.A., on September 29, 1939, the nesting site of a pair of Cockatiels (*Leptolophus hollandicus*) was pointed out to me. The hollow, which had a westerly aspect, was in a roadside eucalypt at the height of 23 feet. It was then about 5 p.m. and the male was sitting, for he came out when we knocked on the tree. With only a limited time and no apparent means of getting the camera into position for photography, a possibility of picturing the species appeared unlikely. Two lads at an adjoining farm had, however, accustomed the birds to human proximity, for they had climbed to the nest several times each day since the eggs were laid. Such an opportunity could not be thrown away so we decided to stay the next day.

The following morning we laboriously dragged two "spars"—a lopped trunk of pine (*Callitris*) and one of belar—from the farm to the nesting tree. After the expenditure of much energy we managed to elevate them, to lash them to a fallen tree at the foot of the nesting tree, to nail and tie on rungs, and to lash poles between the nest tree and the improvised ladder.

The male came up to expectations after a preliminary delay in returning. We stayed at the tree the whole day, and, from about 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., it was the male only that attended the nest. After a slight hesitancy on the lip of the hollow he disappeared into the hole and, presumably, sat on the five eggs. Several pictures were taken during the day. The bird usually called a good deal before entering the hollow. No sign of the female was seen until about 5.15 p.m. Then she returned with the male, which had left about fifteen minutes previously. Both birds sat in the branches for about ten minutes, occasionally alongside each other, which showed up the barring of the hen's tail, and general differences in the plumage. Then, after once or twice edging up to the hollow, the hen dropped straight into the hole. She was put out of the nesting hollow next

morning, but the male was there shortly after, and we did not see the hen again by the time we left.

I was advised that about Christmas the pair had a second clutch of eggs in the same hollow.—C. E. BRYANT, Melbourne, Vic., 16/2/40.

**Attack by a Petrel.**—The *West Australian* of September 26, 1940, contains an account of "a savage bird," namely a Giant Petrel, attacking two women at Cape Leeuwin. The bird "swept down" at the women and maintained a vicious attack, driving the women along the beach for about 100 yards to a point where their cries were heard by the husband of one of them. He ran to their aid, but was preceded by a fox terrier dog, which also was attacked. He struck at the bird and knocked it down, and while he was attending to the women the bird recovered, struggled into the water, and swam away to a few chains from the water's edge, where it remained. He then got a gun and shot it. The dead bird drifted inshore, and was sent to the Western Australian museum. The bird was of the dark phase, but had the chin and cheeks almost pure white.—ERIC SEDGWICK, Wellard, W.A., 19/11/40.

**Large-billed Scrub-Wren in Victoria.**—The locating of at least two families of this bird (*Sericornis magnirostris*) in Sherbrooke Forest, twenty-odd miles east of Melbourne, set me on the trail of finding further records of it for Victoria. However, there are very few references to be found. In *Nests and Eggs*, by A. J. North, vol. 1, p. 302, there is note of a record in a fern gully at Boolarra in 1886. A. J. Campbell, in his *Nests and Eggs*, p. 248, refers to a skin which he examined, and which was one of a pair shot at Loch, South Gippsland. He surmised that it was at the southern limit of its range. Incidentally, Mr. A. G. Campbell tells me that the birds referred to—shot by the Smart brothers in 1897—are now in the Robert Hall collection at Edinburgh. Mathews in *Novitates Zoologicae* (1912) makes the bird a subspecies—*S. m. howei*—with the range given as Victoria, as distinct from the northern forms extending from the typical *S. m. magnirostris* to *S. m. viridior* in northern Queensland. Mr. C. E. Bryant tells me that Dr. Ernst Mayr, in *Amer. Mus. Nov.*, no. 904, p. 16, 1937, states that the "species is apparently rather rare in the southern part of its range," and that the Mathews collection "contains only one specimen from Victoria, and two from New South Wales (except for a series from near the Queensland border)." Further, Dr. Mayr places the form *howei* in the synonymy of *S. m. magnirostris*, but indicates some differences from birds taken at Gosford, N.S.W., and adds that the race *howei* must be recognized if additional Victorian

specimens show the same characters. The only later Victorian record is a possible identification, by Mr. J. Jones, at Marlo, mentioned by Mr. Bryant in *The Emu*, vol. xxxv, p. 228.

I recently heard of the species being seen at Ferntree Gully and Kallista, in the Dandenongs, and have myself seen it there. In the field the species looks a very plain little bird, brown on the back and head, and light fawn underneath. The comparatively-large, straight bill shows clearly. It favours the tops of shrubs and works higher in the trees than *S. frontalis*, which mainly keeps to the undergrowth. No nests were found at Sherbrooke, but it evidently breeds early, as one family was seen to contain well-grown young which were being fed early in November. Mr. Frank Howe tells me that he has found nests at Ferntree Gully in hanging clumps of wire grass at about a height of five to six feet. It would be interesting to have further records of its occurrence so that its distribution may be better known.—INA WATSON, Jolimont, Vic., 17/11/40.

**Land Birds on the Water.**—Some rather unusual observations have been recorded by Capt. A. J. Burgess of Currie, King Island. We have all heard, and several of us have had personal experience, of birds being blown out to sea and settling on the rigging of ships, but to observe ordinary land species alight on the water for a brief rest, then rise again and proceed on their way, is a different matter. Capt. Burgess relates: "The first bird I saw was the little ground-lark; that was two years ago. I thought that it was an accident, and as a strong wind was blowing with a choppy sea, I watched, expecting to see him flapping around in the water. He kept still with wings outstretched flat on the surface; after a rest for a minute he lifted into the wind and flew off. Since then I have seen robins do the same. Yesterday I noticed a fast-flying bird, grey in colour, coming to the boat. At first it seemed its intention was to alight on the boat, but it changed its mind at the last moment and settled on the choppy sea with wings extended, remained about the same time as the others, lifted off a wave and made to shore. This was the little brown quail."

It would have been interesting if the observer had stated the time of year when these observations were made, and the species of robin noted, as there is an impression in some quarters that the Flame-Robin (*Petroica phoenicea*), or a proportion of them, migrated from Tasmania to Victoria at the approach of winter.—H. STUART DOVE, Devonport, Tas., 23/11/40.

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Pressure on space has necessitated holding over Congress matter, including Reports and the Presidential Address.